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LAST100: VIDEO 10a: “A Decade of Revolution in Cuba”

Last time, we talked about populism, the slipperiest of political concepts but also a phenomenon that increasingly seems to surround us, wherever we look. Defining populism, we first noted that its resistance to definition, to being pinned down, seems to be one of its essential characteristics. We added that populism is a gesture that deflects criticism or questioning, trading instead in obviousness and what we take for granted—for who could possibly question that? Above all, what populism assumes is that we are the people, and that the people are the ground of politics, even as its (unspeakable) work is to create that effect as its presupposition. Populism bids to represent that people in the face of its enemies, an elite that can take various forms depending on the flavor of the populism in question, but that is always presented as having somehow distorted or subverted the natural (obvious) state of things. The populist leader reluctantly agrees—reluctantly, because he (less often, she) is only responding to the people’s demands—to put everything back in its rightful place.

Peronism and its Discontents

To illustrate this mechanism, we looked at Argentine Peronism. If Latin Americans do populism well, Argentina does it best of all. We saw how Peronism constructs a people, positing its emergence in the fateful demonstration that first brought Juan Perón to power, and then re-stages that primal scene through successive mobilizations until, finally, it reaches a limit with Evita’s “renunciamiento” of 1951. Not that this puts an end to the Peronist project. In some ways, quite the reverse: Argentina’s current government is (once again) Peronist; and ultimately, for vast swathes of the population, Peronism does become naturalized, taken for granted. There is a wonderful moment at the end of Argentine author Osvaldo Soriano’s novel, *No habrá más penas ni olvido* (translated as *A Funny Dirty Little War*), when one of the characters says he “never meddled in politics”

because he was "always a Peronist." The ultimate success of any political program comes when it seems no longer to be political, but merely a matter of habit and common sense.

But not everyone buys into populism. Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's rock opera, *Evita* (for which Madonna played the titular role on film), has a figure shadowing Eva Perón throughout her rise and fall. He is perennially present, but almost always at a distance. In the crowd cheering beneath the balcony of the presidential palace, he is the only one not to be caught up in the moment; as the anthem "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina" sounds out, he shakes his head and turns from the spectacle. Later, in a dream sequence as Evita sickens, he and the first lady sing (and dance) a confrontational waltz: "How long do you think this pantomime can last?" he asks her. "Go, if you're able, to somewhere unstable," she responds. "Whip up your hate in some tottering state, but not here, dear. Is that clear, dear?" Played by Antonio Banderas, it is not immediately clear in the movie who Evita's symbolic antagonist might be.

Evita's shadow is in fact supposed to be Che Guevara. And though his role in the musical flies in the face of the historical record (Che was barely twenty-four years old when Evita died, and never had any opportunity to meet her), it makes some sense to pair these two Argentine icons as contrasting political visions or imaginaries: Eva Perón, the populist figurehead dressed to the nines and surveying the crowd in the Plaza de Mayo at the center of Buenos Aires, versus Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the die-hard socialist in combat fatigues, traipsing with a small guerrilla cohort through rugged countryside in a foreign land.

Che Guevara

Che was born in the city of Rosario to a middle-class family and studied medicine before embarking on extended travel, first around Argentina and later (by motorcycle) through much of South America. In 1954, he was in Guatemala, where he witnessed first-hand the CIA-sponsored coup to overthrow democratically-elected president Jacobo Arbenz. This cemented his view that armed struggle was the only way to ensure the changes that he now believed the region required. In 1955, in Mexico City, Guevara met the young ex-lawyer Fidel Castro, already a seasoned rebel in his native Cuba, who was plotting to

bring down the US-backed dictator, Fulgencio Batista. Pledging himself to Castro's cause, Che crossed the Caribbean with him the following year, in a decrepit yacht with eighty or so other would-be revolutionaries. In the subsequent guerrilla campaign in the Sierra Maestra mountains, Guevara distinguished himself for his organizational skills, tactical intelligence, and occasional ruthlessness, and he rose up the ranks. He was in charge at the final strategic battle that saw Castro's forces take the town of Santa Clara in December 1958, and he entered Havana on January 2, 1959, ahead of Castro himself, securing the capital the day after the deposed despot had abandoned the city and fled into exile.

In the new, revolutionary government, Guevara took up a series of positions over the next few years, from commanding a prison where he supervised tribunals that led to dozens of executions, to heading a national land reform initiative. He served as Finance Minister and President of the National Bank. But it was not for what he did in these roles (where his achievements, as Dawson details, were decidedly mixed) that he gained fame as figurehead for the revolutionary and decolonizing spirit that was sweeping much of the Third World. That had much more to do with his writing.

Guevara was an inveterate reader and writer, who wrote and published diaries of his travels and military campaigns. He put out a manual, *Guerrilla Warfare*, that elaborated "foco" theory, which held that the key to a successful revolutionary uprising was the work of a small group of committed men establishing bases in the countryside, providing a model and inspiration to the local population to rise up with them. He also wrote letters, articles, and speeches that he delivered around the globe, from Cuba and elsewhere in Latin America, to conferences in Asia and Africa, to the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York, where he also gave interviews and established contact with like-minded activists. Through these appearances, and the imagery and press attention that they brought, as well as through the spread of his words themselves, Che established himself as a cogent and charismatic theorist of revolutionary change.

The New Man

Different political imaginaries are distinguished, among other ways, by the kinds of subject or agent that they produce or project. Liberalism, for instance, envisages the basic

social unit as the individual, abstract and equal in the eyes of the law, equipped with rights and responsibilities. Populism, as we have seen, stages the people as always already the bedrock of politics, even though that people is as much a product as a prerequisite of such staging. Other imaginaries put (say) family, clan, community, nation, race, gender, or class front and center as forms of subjectivity that determine the course of history. For Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" ("The Manifesto of the Communist Party"), and it is the working class or proletariat that are to be the "gravediggers" of bourgeois society. But in less industrialized societies, where the proletariat is neither numerically large nor politically significant (and this was still the case in most of Latin America), revolutionary Marxism runs up against a problem: without sufficient gravediggers, who gives capitalism the burial it deserves?

Guevara's letter to the Uruguayan journalist, Carlos Quijano, outlines the birth of a new subject, the "new man." Unlike other candidates for subject of history, this is also for the most part a future subject, whose arrival is still to come; this is a "21st Century Man," who will put behind him the "decadent and morbid" twentieth century (268). Indeed, there is something messianic about this figure, who will one day redeem a fallen history much as the Judaeo-Christian Messiah is foreseen as both judging and putting an end to a world contaminated by original sin.

But let us pause here. Take a look at Guevara's letter, and identify some of the characteristics of this "new human being" that Che believes is being forged in the fires of revolution. What is this new man like? How does he differ from what is (presumably) the "old man" we see around us? Then one more question: Would we welcome him even if he were to turn up? How much do we want to share Guevara's utopian vision? While you think about that, I will have a Cuba Libre, that classic mix of Cuban spirit and US pop. But I'll be right back.

[Pause]

So what did you find? First, it may seem to go without saying that the new man is, after all, a *man*. Yes, fifty or sixty years ago it would have been more common (in both English

and Spanish) to use the word "man" ("hombre") to refer to men and women alike, but there is little doubt that this is a gendered subject, whose purported virtues tend to be those traditionally associated with masculinity. There were women who achieved prominence within the Cuban revolutionary struggle (such as Haydée Santamaría), or who fought with Che in his other campaigns ("Tania the Guerrilla"), but for the most part they were praised to the extent that they shared these same masculine virtues, such as physical endurance, or a willingness to give up family or personal ties for the sake of the greater cause. And however much the Revolution empowered women—in terms of educational opportunities or reproductive rights, for instance—it has seldom challenged traditional, even *machista*, visions of masculinity, as is evident in the regime's ambivalent (at best) attitude to homosexuality. The new man, even if she is a woman, is male and militant along the lines of a military vanguard or an army's shock troops.

Second, then, the new man is also characterized by sacrifice. He is an ascetic, who forgoes "the temptation to follow the beaten paths of material interest" (263), just as the revolution's leaders "pay a price for the heroic fact of constituting a vanguard as a nation" (271). In fact, the new man should renounce all temptation, for he is a moral subject as well as a political one, and indeed the revolution itself is as much about morality as it is about politics. After all, in Che's letter, the debased present that the new man will redeem is condemned more for its "decadence" than for its injustice or oppression.

Third, the new man is motivated by love; "it is impossible to think of an authentic revolutionary without this quality" (270). Indeed, despite the emphasis that Guevara puts on education and ideology ("society as a whole must become a huge school" [263]), his revolutionary vision is not only more moral than it is political, it is also more affective than it is cognitive or intellectual. The new man is redeemed and redemptive less because he thinks differently from contemporary man, than because he *feels* differently. The revolution has done its work when it has become a matter of "habit" (264), taken for granted, perhaps little different from populism. It is less concerned to instill a capacity for critique.

Surely there are other characteristics of the new man (that he is an unfinished subject, for instance; or that he is prefigured by the guerrilla combatant). And we may want to add

an attribute of our own: that he is unrealistic or unlikely to arrive. This is certainly Dawson's criticism of Guevara's promotion of "moral" rather than material rewards—that they simply do not work—though he himself also notes how many Cubans *were* prepared to put up with the sacrifices asked of them, so long as "it would lead to a better world" (255). But we might better ask if we would *want* to live in a world populated by "new men" (and women). For this would be a world of sacrifice even once such sacrifice were no longer necessary, a world in which moralism displaces politics, and in which love is recast as a form of duty. Like the story—or myth (and the two can hardly be separated)—of Che Guevara himself, it would be perhaps equal parts admirable, equal parts tragic and sad.

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