

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد
بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم
از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Diego Sztulwark

12.12.2022

Che, writing and reading

The Last Political Writer



Sources: The Rocket to the Moon

"Guevara is the last reader because we are already facing the practical man in its purest form, and at the same time maintains a relationship with reading that accompanies him all his life." Ricardo Piglia

If Ernesto "Che" Guevara was throughout his life an extreme writer, Ricardo Piglia has the finest understanding of that radical relationship between literature and experience that is at the basis of a way of understanding politics and the Latin American revolution of the 60s. His texts—diaries, correspondence, notes, reports, articles, and speeches—bordered the

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

intimacy of the war gorge. From *Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria* (1956-59) to *Diario de Bolivia* (1967) there is in Guevara a writing of the guerrilla and a constant appeal to books. Hence, Piglia assures in his book *The Last Reader* that in Che fiction is combined about the edge of the strictest practice, carrying the weight of books in his backpack as the only exception to the rule of light march that defines the combatant in the bush. Che read in the breaks of the war, lamented losing a volume of Trotsky in an ambush of the Bolivian army and clung to literature as one of the few defects he would not have known how to renounce.

Alegría de Pío is a brief text of personal memories about the tragic episode of December 5, 1956, in which the combatants of the Granma boat, exhausted and starving walkers, were gunned down by the aviation of the Batista dictatorship near Las Coloradas beach. The episode, which according to Guevara was the "baptism of fire" of what "would be the rebel army," is part of *Passages of the Revolutionary War*. There is narrated the agony of the young Argentine doctor, doctor of the expedition, who when he sees a companion of his leave a box of ammunition in the middle of the shooting reacts by abandoning the heavy first aid kit: "I took the box of bullets, leaving the backpack to cross the clearing that separated me from the reeds." The story is famous: arriving at the natural refuge of the cane field, Che writes: "I felt a strong blow to the chest and a wound to the neck; I thought I was dead of myself." In those conditions, lying down and without resources, "I began to think about the best way to die in that minute when everything seemed lost. I remembered an old story by Jack London, where the protagonist leaning on a tree trunk prepares to end his life with dignity, knowing that he was condemned to death by frostbite, in the frozen areas of Alaska. Piglia does not miss the opportunity to point out the appearance of a literary memory at the moment that seemed to be that of his death and concludes a first sense of what could be understood by "extreme reader": one who turns to fiction to extract from there a model capable of shaping a limit experience. According to Piglia, the story that Che evokes is *Lighting the bonfire*. It is worth reproducing a fragment: "He lost the battle against the cold, which penetrated his body everywhere, insidiously. Upon noticing it, he made a superhuman effort to get up and keep running. But as soon as he had advanced thirty meters, he began to stagger again and fell again. This was his last moment of panic. When he regained his breath and self-control, he sat in the snow and faced for the first time with the idea of receiving death with dignity."

In a farewell letter to his "Dear Old Men", Che evokes Don Quixote: "Once again I feel Rocinante's ribs under my heels, I return to the road with the adarga on my arm." In the letter he returns to the episode of his conversion from doctor to soldier ("soldier I am not so bad"), and reviews the decade that separates him from Alegría de Pío with another phrase of reader – of another type of reading, the properly political one – "my Marxism is rooted and purified". Aware of the original type of figure he has become, he adds: "Many will call me adventurous, and I am, only of a different type and of those who put their skin to demonstrate their truths." Piglia reads: quixotism as a way of dealing with reality.

Narrator is, for Walter Benjamin, who is able to transmit oral experiences. Unlike informative communication, the transmission of lived stories involves the art of capturing meaning and sharing it through gestures and words. Che fits into that brief definition. It makes the experience, captures it, writes it or tells it. That would be the writer Guevara. Then came the political Guevara, who blocks the writer. Piglia notes a certain incompatibility between the two: Guevara "molds and transmits in solitude." The value of his narrative remains in his experience of self-transformation, in the exemplarity of his own constitution as a figure of a new man. He puts it this way: "There is a pre-political tension in the search for meaning in Guevara." If I understand Piglia's thesis correctly, Guevara "has solved the dilemma" between literature as a model of life and extreme experience by way of repetition and realization: living thoroughly, making fictional models. Literature accompanies Guevara in dispossession, in various situations of danger, outside the very circuit in which literature as an exhibition gives prestige. London's appointment comes in the most final solitude, when he needs the reference of another life from which to learn to die. But politics disturbs his vocation as a writer. In this line Trotsky would be an antecedent.

If something is unforgettable about Piglia's text, it is his comment on a photo of Che in Bolivia. In it he is seen "reading in the midst of the desolation and terrible experience of the persecuted guerrillas." Clinging to the book to the end. Piglia connects this scene with a quote from Guevara's diary of the guerrillas in the Congo: "The fact that I ran away to read, thus fleeing from everyday problems, tended to distance me from contact with men, not to mention that there are certain aspects of my character that do not make it easy to be intimate." The book out of place and reading as a subtraction. The quoted excerpt belongs to the epilogue of the book *Passages of the Revolutionary War: Congo*. After evaluating

the political factors of failure, Guevara writes a long self-criticism that begins with the expression "I have to make the most difficult analysis, that of my personal performance." In a stern tone Guevara writes there: "As for the contact with my men, I think I have been sacrificed enough so that no one imputed anything to me personally and physically, but my two fundamental weaknesses were satisfied in the Congo: tobacco, which I lacked very little and reading, which was always abundant. The discomfort of having a pair of broken boots or a change of dirty clothes or eating the same pitanza as the troop and living in the same conditions, for me, did not mean sacrifice." Lee Piglia: books and tobacco. And he adds: abstraction as weakness and refuge, cut, contradiction and addiction. An inalienable habit. Piglia says that when he is captured in Ñancahuazu, "the only thing he keeps (because he has lost everything, he doesn't even have shoes) is a leather briefcase, which he has tied to his belt, on his right side, where he keeps his campaign diary and his books."

Guevara's counter-example would be Gramsci. The reading situation in the hammock, during the pauses of the march through the mountain, is the exact opposite of the fascist prison. Fixed in space, arrested, the Italian communist is "the politician separated from social life in prison" and in those circumstances "the greatest reader of his time." Immobilized in the Mussolinian dungeons, he consults all the books that are within his reach, reads one a day and writes the comments of his studies. Its intellectual task is correlative to the impediment of political praxis. There is in Piglia an intuition about a proportional inversion between forced stillness and subtle elaboration of great political notions such as "historical bloc" and "popular national culture". The opposition of circumstances would be present in divergent political conceptions: Gramscian hegemony as plastic enmity and Guevarian antagonism as direct enmity. In both cases the policy is explained from the process of formation of the will. But where the communist describes it in a complex process of articulating alliances, the Argentine would summarize it in the establishment of a combatant subjectivity. Unlike Gramsci, Guevara would be fluent only for march, but rigid for politics. What Piglia believes is that by taking his own transformation as a reference, Guevara would have deprived himself of elaborating a communicable policy. A subject capable of accounting for the "tragic tension" of his experience, he becomes ineffective in moving from individual sacrifice to political construction, although not for the construction of myth.

Piglia's hypothesis is that the vocation of writer is formed in Guevara in the experience of reading. The data he takes into account are the following: unable due to asthma to attend school, he learned to read with his mother as a child; very soon he becomes, in the words of his brother Roberto, a "madman for reading"; reading is in Guevara "initiatory practice" and the only line of continuity capable of accompanying him in his successive metamorphosis, the only habit from which he does not get rid of. There would even be a certain physical dependence on the book, a serial setting of asthma and reading: inhaler to breathe and books to read, as objects that "must always be carried". Guevara reads and writes because he reads. Take notes and make them. Writing as an immediate record of his experience, on which he returns to give it shape. Traces of the project of a writer's life are scattered in his letters. He refers to Ernesto Sábato in April 1960: "What for me was the most sacred thing in the world, the title of writer" and to León Felipe he writes in '64: "I got a drop of a failed poet that I carry inside and I turned to you". These letters retain extraordinary value. In which he addresses Sábato there is another phrase as important as the one Piglia quotes: "The war revolutionized us." What would have been a writer in Guevara was definitively modified in and by political experience. The explanation he gives to the author of *The Tunnel* is most interesting when it comes to portraying the formation of a political thought: the war demanded from the combatants an unexpected conversion into pedagogues who had to "explain to the defenseless peasants how they could take a rifle and prove to those soldiers that an armed peasant was worth as much as the best of them; and to learn how one's strength is worthless if it is not surrounded by everyone's strength."

Looking for the writer, Piglia finds the sacrificial politician. He does not accept the idea that there was in Guevara something like a new figure, capable of weaving literature and politics in impure proportions. He sees it as a finished product, where there would be, in the words of Abel Gilbert, a subject "in transition." Its formula is: "The politician triumphs where the writer fails." With different variations we can find similar phrases in his writings on Sarmiento and Walsh. The writer succumbs and sacrifices himself in political practice. To what extent does Piglia not talk about himself here? Of the writer who must subtract himself from the revolutionary imminence to write. Certain epochs would seem to subject the writer to an iron choice, one inevitably failing where the other triumphs. But the "politician who emerges from the ruins of the writer"—Guevara or Trotsky—is an unreal, illusory, tragic hero, nostalgic politician of literature.

The idea of the unreal politician, who begins his formation as a "wandering traveler who becomes politicized and has no insertion," then reappears in the revolutionary who tends towards "a non-national form of politics." Piglia reads Che's policy as a will without borders and a "form without territory." Sacrifice of the body and absence of particular historical conditions. But to say so is too biased. Because it implies ignoring Guevara's perception of open space by the expansive influence of a triumphant revolution, and the attempt to build a tune with the triumphant anti-colonial war machines in much of Asia and Africa. Guevarist nomadism becomes incomprehensible outside the geopolitical perspective that animates the turn of world politics from east/west to north/south. So the relationship between space and politics can be taken up again from the close relationship that Piglia perceives in the journey of the young Guevara. Their own metamorphoses are inseparable from a formative link with the territory. The travels of the young Guevara are an introduction to the compendium of the social figures of Latin America, from the marginal to the sick, from the social victims to the political exiles and as a culminating point of that politicizing process. The mythical conversation held with Fidel Castro in July 1955, read as a "qualitative leap" that leads Guevara from Marxism to combat, would be the culminating moment of a conversion. In September of '57 Che is already commander of the Rebel Army. At this point, Piglia believes, the human form is already formed and, perhaps, crystallized. Che would have reached the universal form (the "essential guerrilla", as "moment of decision" and determination of the friend-enemy relationship), later applicable to different national situations. As if the historical conditions for revolution were poured out of the model. Given the objective conditions in almost the entire third world, Guevara believed that it was a question of accelerating the creation of subjective conditions, in a historical stage in which the imperialist power imposed the anti-insurgency war: making a thousand Vietnams is the watchword. Unlike Leon Rozitchner's more nuanced reading of the relationship between Guevarism and counter-violence, Piglia recognizes only two figures in Guevarian theater: that of the traitor and that of the hero. That would be what group politics "in that terrible tradition of Guevarism" would boil down to: a practice of constant control. Che's guerrilla is thus perceived as a "microscopic state that always lives in a state of exception" and in which the formative tension on the subject is reduced to testing the relationship "between asceticism and political consciousness", without further consideration of what she had of research on the dynamics of the revolutionary subjective in the context of a class struggle confronted with the colonial war.

The inclusion of Guevara in the world of great readers allows not only to demystify the revolutionary, but also to place him in the atypical game of imagination in which politics is learning and way of life, taking into account literature as a fundamental dimension of the formative journey of the spirit. Much more interesting would be the challenge to the "caste" if this lack of adventure were included as a deficit of sources of rebellion and cause of its reluctant subordination of praxis to the state of things. *The Last Reader* is an anthology of everything that remains inaudible outside of literature and the writer's most personal homage to reading as a counter-behavior. In this fantastic universe, Borgism acts as an "ability to read everything as a fiction and to believe in its power", and the figure of the celibate detective fascinated by the desire to know holds a unique lucidity, coming from the place he occupies on the margins of society.

Original source: The [Last Political Writer – The Rocket to the Moon](#)

Rebellion 10.12.2022