

FROM CUBA TO BOLIVIA: GUEVARA’S FOCO THEORY IN PRACTICE

Joshua Johnson

*Department of Political Science
University of Calgary*

Abstract – In order to account for Ernesto Guevara’s dramatic swing of fate from Cuba to Bolivia, it is necessary to explore his revolutionary theory developed in response to his experiences in the 1959 Cuban revolution. His foco theory, which places a high degree of primacy on the guerrilla band in creating the conditions for revolution, is starkly contrasted by an historical analysis of the Cuban revolution, where economic, social, and nationalistic forces combined to the benefit of Guevara and Castro. Exploring the political climate of Bolivia at the time of Guevara’s attempted insurrection, it becomes apparent that none of these forces were present for the exploitation of the guerrillas, which ultimately doomed the revolution and Guevara himself. Both the Cuban and Bolivian cases show the significance of socio-political factors in determining the success of an insurrection, and put the validity of Guevara’s foco theory into question.

Introduction

Shortly after the successful insurgency led by Fidel Castro in Cuba, 1959, a prominent guerrilla fighter named Ernesto “Che” Guevara published an extended essay entitled, “Guerrilla Warfare,” which he later augmented with “Guerrilla Warfare: A Method,” and “A Message to the Tricontinental.” Intended to provide the necessary steps for successful insurgency in Latin America, these works provided both philosophical and practical guidelines for unconventional warfare. Guevara’s attempt to recreate the Cuban revolution in Bolivia in 1966, however, ended in disaster, and Guevara himself was captured and executed within a year.

In order to explain why the lessons extracted from the Cuban revolution of 1959 failed to bring Guevara and his guerrilla movement success in Bolivia, it is necessary to understand the main tenants of Guevara’s theory established in his extended essays. This theoretical base can then be compared to an historical analysis of Cuba’s successful insurrection. In this manner, Guevara’s retrospective analysis can be scrutinized, and the accuracy of his own appraisal examined. The success of the Cuban revolution will then be contrasted to a disastrous insurgency campaign in Bolivia. Again, historical analysis will describe both the implementation of Guevara’s doctrine, as well as the socio-political environment in which the insurgency was attempted. It will thusly be possible to conclude that Guevara’s theory, although highlighting some of the factors crucial to revolutionary success, is ultimately inadequate by failing to consider pre-existing social factors that contribute to the success or failure of an insurrection. As well, it will become clear that the ideological commitment to international socialism evident in Guevara’s later works also contributed to his failure in Bolivia.

Revolutionary Theory

In 1960, Ernesto “Che” Guevara wrote an extended essay, proposing that the Cuban revolution revealed the basic requirements for any Latin American nation to successfully wage a guerrilla war. As he summarizes, the Cuban experience presents three fundamental lessons:

- (1) Popular forces can win a war against the army.
- (2) It is not necessary to wait for until all the conditions for making revolution exist; the insurrection can create them.
- (3) In underdeveloped Latin America, the countryside is the basic area for armed fighting.¹

The first point is simply a testament to the power of guerrilla warfare when supported by the masses, which in itself has not caused much discussion. Points (2) and (3), however, have led to a distinctive revolutionary theory, popularly referred to as the *foco* theory. Point (2) represents a major break from conventional Marxist theory, whereby the proletariat must build class-consciousness through the development of advanced capitalism, revolutionary solidarity through the collective experience of class oppression, and then finally a revolution by the proletariat.² Guevara shucks aside what he sees as a defeatist and overly patient outlook, advocating instead for immediate action initiated by an elite few. It is Guevara's contention that the existence of a guerrilla *foco* can pose a threat to the legitimacy of a government's right to rule and its exclusive monopoly over violence. Such an open challenge should draw an oppressive state to use more extreme levels of oppression, thus radicalizing all levels of government opposition.³ The government's use of extreme oppression, in the Latin American context, will typically fall disproportionately on the rural peasantry, thus validating Guevara's third point. Rather than waiting for a working class to emerge and gain revolutionary ideals, rural peasants can be elicited by the guerrilla *foco* for support, first by hiding and informing the fighters, then joining the *foco* in militant action.⁴ Peasant support can be further secured, according to Guevara, with promises of agrarian reform, which should form the staple political discourse of the guerrilla *foco*.⁵

Although providing a high degree of agency to the guerrilla band in shaping a nation's political culture, Guevara admits that the *foco* is not unlimited in its power to ignite revolution: "Naturally, it is not to be thought that all conditions for revolution are going to be created through the impulse given to them by guerrilla activity."⁶ Guevara acknowledges that when a government has been popularly elected, and legal outlets for political dissent exist, a revolution cannot be inspired. Rather, in these cases, peaceful action can replace the need for guerrilla tactics in affecting desired change.⁷

In 1963, Guevara adjusts his theory in, "Guerrilla Warfare: A Method." Of particular importance, the earlier notion that a democratic government cannot be defeated through insurgency is dismissed. Now, according to Guevara, democratic governments can still be exploitative, drafting laws and re-writing constitutions so that the interests of the bourgeois are maintained within a legal framework. Accordingly, revolutionaries "should not allow the word 'democracy' to be utilized apologetically to represent the dictatorship of the exploiting

¹ Ernesto "Che" Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare: Introduction by Marc Becker* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), 7.

² Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Exploring Revolution: Essays on Latin American Insurgency and Revolutionary Theory* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 1991), 105.

³ Jose A. Moreno, "Che Guevara on Guerrilla Warfare: Doctrine, Practice and Evaluation," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 12 (April 1970): 114-133.

⁴ Moreno, 118.

⁵ Guevara, 38.

⁶ Guevara, 8.

⁷ Guevara, 8.

classes...”⁸ This is a significant shift in Guevara’s theory, as a government that maintains popular representation is no longer exempt from becoming a target of Guevara’s foco. Rather, Guevara at this point suggests that a foco, properly employed, can ignite a revolution anywhere in Latin America.

In his final essay, “A Message to the Tricontinental,” written while engaged in guerrilla warfare in Bolivia, Guevara adds yet another dimension to his theory. Here Guevara stresses the international character of the revolutionary movement, stating, “We must bear in mind that imperialism is a world system, the last stage of capitalism- and it must be defeated in a world confrontation.”⁹ Guevara singles out the United States of America as the contemporary colonial power in Latin America, and advocates drawing the nation into a large-scale guerrilla war: “... the vanguard of the peoples, the Cuban Revolution, will today have a task of much greater relevance: creating a Second or a Third Vietnam, or the Second *and* Third Vietnam of the world”.¹⁰ The ends of a guerrilla foco are significantly altered, where initially content to focus on liberating peasants from a national autocracy, Guevara has taken on the much larger, and decisively socialist, goal of liberating the whole of Latin America from the perceived colonialism of American capitalism.

Cuba Revisited

With a basic understanding of the main tenants of Guevara’s theory, it is now possible to compare his conclusions with the Cuban revolution waged by Fidel Castro’s guerrilla foco. Beginning in the Sierra Maestra Mountains in 1956, Castro, with the support of Guevara, built a small band of revolutionary fighters to challenge the military dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista.¹¹ Establishing their primary support amongst the rural peasantry by promising agrarian reform, the revolutionary movement succeeded in growing throughout both the rural and urban regions of the entire country, ultimately allowing for a successful general strike against Batista in 1959, and bringing Castro to power.¹² Jose Moreno describes the effect of Castro’s foco in sparking revolution: “By setting up a guerrilla foco, Castro and his men affected the revolutionary situation in two ways: first, they helped accelerate the spread of social disintegration of the old structure to the whole system, and second, they made people aware of such a situation.”¹³ As Moreno implies, Castro was able to articulate dissent, as well as offer an open challenge to the current regime. This in turn fuelled a grotesquely heavy-handed response by Batista, who ultimately proved to be a major asset to Castro’s cause.

Batista’s reaction to emergence of Castro’s guerrilla movement reinforces Guevara’s statement that challenging an oppressive government will lead to a terrorized peasantry. Along with a faithfully followed “take no prisoners policy,” Batista’s soldiers attacked rural villages, often without even the pretext of seeking information.¹⁴ Indulging in extremely violent behaviour was common, as Timothy Wickham-Crowley notes: “One particularly brutal officer

⁸ Guevara, 147.

⁹ Guevara, 171.

¹⁰ Guevara, 171.

¹¹ Richard Weitz, “Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Latin America, 1960-1980,” *Political Science Quarterly* 101 (1986): 399.

¹² Merle Kling, “Cuba: A Case Study of a Successful Attempt to Seize Political Power by the Application of Unconventional Warfare,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 341 (May 1962): 46-47.

¹³ Moreno, 129.

¹⁴ Wickham-Crowley, 64.

in the Sierra Maestra region, Lieutenant Casillas, literally drove the peasantry from the village of Palma Mocha, and kept human ears in a box to show visitors.”¹⁵ Dismemberment was a frequently used tactic amongst Batista’s soldiers, as exemplified by the horrid story of Haydee Santamaria, who was shown her brothers eyeball in an attempt to force information from her.¹⁶ The violence of Batista’s counter-insurgency strategy did much to radicalize the peasantry and push them into the open and waiting arms of Castro’s revolutionary band, thus fuelling revolutionary fervour in the country. This is exactly the situation that Guevara purports to be inevitable, and gives initial credence to his theory.

Wickham-Crowley, however, suggests that a cultural disposition towards rebellion already existed in the Oriente province, where the infamous Sierra Maestra Mountains are located, long before Castro and Guevara began their campaign: “Culturally, Oriente harboured a ‘Wild West’ type of mentality that made it the center for lawlessness in Cuba, a focus of banditry, a haven for refugees from the law.”¹⁷ This, matched with a high level of squatters in the region, made the inhabitants of the Oriente province particularly susceptible to Castro’s message of revolution with the promise of land.¹⁸

It must also be noted that Castro’s strategy involved not only securing the peasant masses, but also aligning with the middle class. This is apparent in Castro’s signing of the Caracas Declaration in 1958, a document that called for the unity of anti-Batista forces in an effort to restore civil democracy in Cuba, and called for Batista’s replacement by centrist, Manuel Urrutia.¹⁹ Although in retrospect Castro was likely less than genuine in his support for the Caracas Declaration, it was a strategy that permitted him to appeal to the middle classes, and allowed him to benefit from riding nationalistic platform as opposed to a socialist one.²⁰ Therefore, although Guevara’s depiction of the Cuban revolution is largely accurate, it fails to take into account the socio-cultural factors that existed in Cuba before the revolution, and does not recognize the pragmatic political message presented by Castro.

Failure in Bolivia

Guevara’s 1966-67 campaign in Bolivia did not seem so hopeless in its outset. The Barrientos regime was not especially popular in Bolivia; a survey conducted in 1968 showed that 69% of Bolivian miners felt they would be better off without the national government in power, after having seeing their wages drop by nearly half in the previous decade.²¹ As well, strikes by miners and demonstrations by teachers and students increasingly called into question the legitimacy of Barriento’s government.²² Guevara’s foco unit, which called itself the National Liberation Army (ELN), also managed initial military success. A Bolivian member of Guevara’s unit describes their position in 1967: “Despite our small numbers, we had captured almost a hundred soldiers, including high ranking officers; we had put a large number of enemy troops out of commission; and we had captured various weapons and a lot of ammunition.”²³ However,

¹⁵ Wickham-Crowley, 64.

¹⁶ Wickham-Crowley, 64.

¹⁷ Wickham-Crowley, 45.

¹⁸ Wickham-Crowley, 46.

¹⁹ Weitz, 400.

²⁰ Kling, 47.

²¹ Weitz, 403.

²² Moreno, 131.

²³ Inti Peredo, “My Campaign with Che,” in *Revolution and Revolutionaries: Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, ed. Daniel Castro (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1999), 137.

despite the unpopular Barrientos regime, and the tactical success of the ELN, Guevara's foco was ultimately defeated, Guevara himself executed in 1967, and the ELN officially eliminated by 1969.²⁴ Edward Friedman describes the greatest failure of the ELN, which was its inability to attract new recruits:

Revolutionary ambushes succeed because some people sacrifice their lives to entrap the enemy. The revolution continues and grows because more people run forward to replace the dead. Che never sufficiently answers the question of what will make people willing to fight and die.²⁵

Guevara preached agrarian reform in Bolivia under the presumption that the peasantry would be just as destitute and neglected as their Cuban counterparts. Bolivian peasants, however, saw their social standing drastically increase after the National Revolutionary Movement's (MNR) ascension to power in 1952. Indeed, one of the first acts of the MNR government was the establishment of the Ministry of Peasant Affairs. This ministry was mandated to improve peasant education and hygiene, as well as incorporate the peasant masses into national culture and study the needs of agrarian workers.²⁶ This led to the Agrarian Reform Decree of August 2, 1953, which distributed large amounts of church and ranch lands to peasants, as well as establishing quasi-private landholdings with the incorporation of wage labour.²⁷ As the average peasant were now able to own the very land they worked on, issues such as quality of equipment, access to loans, and the cost of transport become the focal concerns of the agrarian worker.²⁸ The vague rallying cry of agrarian reform was hardly worth listening to.

Guevara's assumption that the Bolivian government would respond to the emergence of his foco by lashing out against the peasants also proved false. Indeed, Barrientos proved far more adept than Batista in counter-insurgency. Rather than giving his militia free reign over his civilian population, Barrientos, with the help of the United States Central Intelligence Agency, trained a special outfit called the Second Bolivian Ranger Battalion, created specifically to destroy Guevara's foco. Barrientos waited until this battalion had finished their specialized training before deploying them against Guevara's forces, ensuring that the militant component of his counter-insurgency strategy did not suffer from the random indulgences of violence that had characterized Batista's army in Cuba.²⁹ Further, Barrientos was well aware of the crucial role that peasants could play, and thus spent nearly half his time in rural areas, opening schools and minor public works projects to better his image in these areas.³⁰ As a result, Barriento's unpopularity was most potent in urban areas, where Guevara had little interest.

It is here that Guevara's foco theory takes one of its major blows, as the Bolivian case demonstrates that peasants cannot always be compelled to join on the side of the guerrillas. An

²⁴ Daniel Castro, *Revolution and Revolutionaries: Guerrilla Movements in Latin America* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1999), 135.

²⁵ Edward Friedman, "Neither Mao, Nor Che: The Practical Evolution of Revolutionary Theory. A Comment on J. Moreno's 'Che Guevara on Guerrilla Warfare'" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 12 (April 1970): 139.

²⁶ James V. Kohl, "Peasant and Revolution in Bolivia, April 9, 1952-August 2, 1953," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 58 (May 1978): 246.

²⁷ Kohl, 247.

²⁸ Weitz, 404.

²⁹ Weitz, 401.

³⁰ Weitz, 410.

astute government will not terrorize their citizens simply because their legitimacy is being challenged, and not all peasants will find the need to support agrarian reform. This adds credibility to Wickham-Crowley's earlier point that the social conditions that prompt peasantry to support an insurgency must already be in place, and that they cannot be created by the guerrilla foco.

Another factor that worked against Guevara was his ideological commitment to his socialist brand of anti-imperialism. Matt Childs explains that the very reason Bolivia was chosen by Guevara for his revolution was not because it seemed ripe for revolution, but because of its strategic position in the heart of South America, where a successful revolution could spread to bordering countries, such as Argentina, Chile, and Peru.³¹ Therefore, Guevara stressed the international nature of the revolution, rather than playing off nationalist sentiments within the region. This, compounded by the fact that the foco comprised of 17 Cubans, and 3 Peruvians along with roughly 29 Bolivians created a sentiment that Guevara's guerrilla band was little more than a foreign intrusion.³² As a result, Barrientos was able to capitalize on national sentiments after Guevara's first attack, sending out a communiqué that read: "...the national territory has been invaded by an armed group made up of diverse nationalities, the majority adhering to the Castro-communist line."³³

By failing to understand the economic position of the Bolivian peasantry, and providing a seemingly foreign force to combat the Barrientos regime, Guevara's revolution could not have been anything more than incoherent to the population that it was supposed to draw support from. As such, regardless of Guevara's tactical genius, the insurrection in Bolivia was doomed to failure.

Conclusion: Assessing the Three Maxims

Guevara's failure in Bolivia resulted from a failure to recognize the external conditions that effect revolutionary movements. The pre-existing tendency towards rebellion in the Oriente province of Cuba, mixed with the disenfranchised and landless peasant population created a wide base of potential support for Castro. These factors simply did not exist in Bolivia. Further, the reactions of the threatened regimes in Cuba and Bolivia played a significant role in determining the level of support the guerrilla movement would receive. Contrary to Guevara's theory, just because a government can be labelled "oppressive," does not mean that it will react in a heavy-handed manner in the face of a challenge to its legitimacy. The competence of the regime's counter-insurgency strategy must be considered an external factor as it has proven to be beyond the control of the guerrilla foco. Finally, Guevara's shift from focusing on national liberation to a socialist war against American capitalism undermined the relevance of his campaign in Bolivia, suggesting that the guerrilla foco cannot create a need for revolution, but must base its struggle on the existing demands of a population. Therefore, while his first maxim that a guerrilla war can be successfully fought with popular support holds true, and his last point concerning rural areas as an ideal location for waging such a war may still be possible, both these maxims are dependent on external factors. Therefore, the second maxim, which states that revolutionary conditions can be created, is, according to the Bolivian experience, false. Revolutions are largely

³¹ Matt D. Childs, "An Historical Critique of the Emergence and Evolution of Ernesto Che Guevara's Foco Theory," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27 (October 1995): 620.

³² Moreno, 121.

³³ Weitz, 408.

determined by external social conditions that are beyond the control of a single revolutionary group.

Bibliography

- Castro, Daniel. *Revolution and Revolutionaries: Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1999.
- Childs, Matt D. “An Historical Critique of the Emergence and Evolution of Ernesto Che Guevara's Foco Theory.” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27, No.3 (October 1995): 593-624.
- Guevara, Ernesto “Che.” *Guerrilla Warfare: Introduction by Marc Becker*. New York, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998.
- Friedman, Edward. “Neither Mao, Nor Che: The Practical Evolution of Revolutionary Theory. A Comment on J. Moreno’s “Che” Guevara on Guerrilla Warfare.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 12, No.2 (April 1970): 134-139.
- Kling, Merle. “Cuba: A Case Study of a Successful Attempt to Seize Political Power by the Application of Unconventional Warfare.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 341, (May 1962): 42-52.
- Kohl, James V. “Peasant and Revolution in Bolivia, April 9, 1952-August 2, 1953.” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 58, No.2 (May 1978): 238-259.
- Moreno, Jose A. “Che Guevara on Guerrilla Warfare: Doctrine, Practice and Evaluation.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 12, Mo.2 (April 1970): 114-133.
- Peredo, Inti. “My Campaign with Che.” In *Revolution and Revolutionaries: Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*. Ed. Castro, Daniel. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1999
- Weitz, Richard. “Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Latin America, 1960-1980.” *Political Science Quarterly* 101, No.3 (1986): 397-413.
- Wickham-Crowley, Timothy P. *Exploring Revolution: Essays on Latin American Insurgency and Revolutionary Theory*. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 1991.