LATIN AMERICAN REVOLUTION

A review of the book Revolution in the Revolution by Regis Debray (Penguin) presenting the main theoretical problems of the revolutions developing throughout Latin America.
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IN THE UNFORTUNATE yet perhaps unavoidable processes of fragmentation and re-alignment now taking place in the world revolutionary movement, perhaps none are so tragic as those in the Latin American movement. Perhaps no nation or continent needs revolution, and therefore a united and strong revolutionary movement, as much as the twenty-one nations of this brutally exploited continent, in which 200 million human beings act out a tragedy whose main elements are starvation, underdevelopment, degradation of the human spirit and a miserable existence for the vast majority of the people.

Carlos Fuentes, a young Mexican novelist, has described Latin America as a "collapsed feudal castle with a cardboard capitalistic facade". The facts are often quoted, but Fuentes gives them an added impact — he lists the following factors:

Continuous monoproducive dependence — in most Latin American countries one primary product accounts for more than 50 per cent of exports.

A continuous system of "latifundio" whereby, in Venezuela for instance, 3 per cent of the population owns 90 per cent of the land.

Continuous underdevelopment — under its present systems, Latin America cannot increase production or use natural resources at the rate required by the population growth — in 1960 for instance, there was no increase in per capita production.

Continuous political stagnation — the continuing feudal structure, backed by armies paid for by the US, denies the masses access to education and concentrates power in the hands of landlords and city capitalists.

Continuous general injustices e.g. 4 per cent of the Latin American population receives 50 per cent of the combined national income.

Continuous dependence on foreign capital — a large part of the Latin American economy does not serve its own development, being merely an extension of foreign economies, particularly that of the US, and benefiting only those economies.
In a remarkable piece of writing, Fuentes goes on to show that more and more Latin Americans see revolution as the way out of their problems — they are tired of the alliance for progress and the meaningless mouthings of the US establishment.

Revolution, yes! Don't be deceived, Americans. Open your eyes. Ask the Peruvian farmer who chews coca (a drug—B.A.) and eats rats, if he wants fake elections or revolutions. Ask the Chilean miner who crawls through the tunnels of Lota if he believes in free enterprise or in revolution. Ask the northeast Brazilian farmer, if he wants capitalism or revolution. Ask the student castrated by the Peruvian dictator if he wants Straissner's free press or revolution.3

Fuentes is neither the first nor the last in a long list of people who have pointed to the terrible conditions of Latin America and to revolution as a means of solving them (read for instance John Gerassi's excellent book4).

Throughout the whole post-conquest history of the continent many of those who started by wanting progress ended by fighting revolutions. Thus a revolution in Mexico in 1810 began in a rural village where the parish priest, Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, "roused the Indian peasants with the appeal: 'My children, will you be free? Will you make the effort to recover from the hated Spaniards the lands stolen from your forefathers three hundred years ago'?"5

The tradition of revolution and wars of liberation in Latin America goes back a long way, from the earliest wars of the Incas and Aztecs against the Spanish invaders in the early sixteenth century, through the wars of national independence led by Simon Bolivar in the early 19th century, to the numerous eruptions against autocratic regimes of the 20th century. Yet none of these revolutions, except for the Cuban revolution of 1959, have achieved true liberation for the majority of the people. And in 1969, four and a half centuries after the first clashes between the conquistadores and the Indians they slaughtered and later conquered, revolutionaries in South America face a situation where the condition of the overwhelming majority of the people is probably worse than ever before, while only Cuba, one of the smaller nations of the continent, has achieved anything like permanent liberation.

Against this backdrop there is taking place in the revolutionary movement of the continent a full scale and often bitter debate over how the revolution is to be won in Latin America. Most see the coming revolution as inevitably socialist in character, but there are wide divergences of opinion over how this revolution is to proceed. There are many different positions, and as many groups (or more) as there are positions, but roughly speaking there are two major lines. Both positions see armed revolution as likely, if not necessary, but one, held apparently by many communist
parties, sees peaceful political work amongst the masses as a necessary condition for the beginning of armed struggle, while the other, advocated by Castro and espoused by many of the newer movements, says that part of the work amongst the masses must be the waging of guerilla warfare, and therefore planning for this must begin immediately.

Into this debate has come a young French intellectual — Regis Debray. In a work of great theoretical importance — Revolution in the Revolution? — he has given the Left a point of departure — a concrete theory of revolution in South America on which to base the current debate. He has posed sharply and clearly the problems which face the revolution in Latin America and has provided an answer which, if it is not the correct one, is at the very least a stimulating challenge for those who disagree to come up with something of equal quality. Moreover, he has questioned many of the shibboleths of the world revolutionary movement, and much of his work has an indirect relevance to revolutionaries everywhere, if only in that it must make them rethink some of their own strategies for revolution.

It is hard to say how much of Debray's essay is his own thinking and interpretation and how much is the thought of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. In two earlier essays? Debray outlined the problems of the various Left movements in South America and undertook a political analysis which provides the basis for Revolution in the Revolution? It is clear in these that his main ideas are derived from discussions with militants in the various nations he visited — in particular he had long discussions with Castro and others in Cuba in 1966 about the experiences of the Cuban revolution. In this, his last work before he was jailed by the Bolivian authorities, he has constructed a more theoretical model, some of which is probably his own.

Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy, editors of the Monthly Review? which published the first English translation of Revolution in the Revolution? suggest that the essay is "a comprehensive and authoritative presentation of the revolutionary thought of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara," and many facts seem to bear this out. On the other hand, in a book of essays by various figures in the world Left on Debray's work?, one of the most trenchant criticisms of his work is made by two Cuban revolutionaries, Simon Torres and Julio Aronde.10 Probably the truth is that Debray has presented the essential core of the "Fidelist" theory, but that some (though certainly not all) of his own extrapolations from this would not be agreed with by the Cubans. At the very least, his work is regarded in Cuba as of major importance, as witness the fact that 200,000 copies of Revolution in the Revolution? were printed in the first edition in Havana.
In the space available I cannot make a detailed assessment of a work such as this. *Revolution in the Revolution?* needs to be read line by line, for even in his accounts of seemingly trivial incidents, Debray has a gift for generalisations which add to the body of revolutionary theory and which contain important implications for revolutionaries everywhere. For instance, in a criticism of the policies of some South American Communist Parties, he points out that the long lists of dead and imprisoned militants "almost all . . . Party members" is not a proof of the correctness of the Party's policies.

". . . sacrifice is not a political argument and martyrdom does not constitute proof." In the hard school of revolution this is a bitter yet inescapable fact. We might all do well to remember it. (In fact, this very quotation was used *against Debray*, in a reply to him by the trotskyist Livio Maitan.)

The central point of Debray's essay is an outline of the Fidelist theory of how the revolution is to be made in Latin America. This theory says that the necessary condition for successful revolution in Latin America is the establishment of the *foco* — a guerilla base in which the revolutionaries can secure themselves against the enemy, and wage a two-sided war of military operations against the army and ideological education of the people. In the *foco* the two aspects — military victories over the army and winning over of the people — are closely related, even combined.

Such a *foco* cannot be controlled from the cities, as has been the case with most guerilla movements to date, but the political and military leadership must exist in the *foco*. Further, the political leadership for the cadres in the cities must to a certain extent come from the guerilla forces in the country, thus completely inverting the previously accepted model.

Much of Debray's essay is given over to elaborations on, and arguments for, this model of revolution in Latin America. In the course of this he castigates all the traditional and neo-traditional sections of the Left without exception or pity. Thus the Communist Parties are accused of dogmatic clinging to theories transplanted from abroad, of neo-reformism, and some leaders of "objective betrayal." Maoism is a reaction to feelings of futility, and is more likely to take root in "politically becalmed regions" and in Europe, than in "the storm centres" of the third world. Trotskyism "in its final state of degeneration, is a medieval metaphysic" and "has nothing to learn from history." "Has anyone ever seen a concrete analysis of a concrete situation from the pen of a trotskyist?"
In his extensive criticisms there is no comfort for anybody on the Left, or if you like, cold comfort for everybody. No-one gains anything but everyone can learn something from his analysis.

There have been, and undoubtedly there will be many more, replies to Debray from various sections of the Latin American Left. In this context, a must is the previously cited collection of essays from Monthly Review Press. Many of the criticisms impress by their use of concrete situations as opposed to Debray’s rather abstract theorising. (It is interesting, and perhaps a warning, that the strongest praise of Debray comes from two European intellectuals far removed from guerilla warfare — Robin Blackburn and Perry Anderson of the English *New Left Review*.) Debray’s style is very much that of the French intellectual, but this lends a color, and, paradoxically perhaps, a clarity to the content which might not have been achieved by another writer.

Debray has brought the logical analysis of the European intellectual to bear on the problems of a quite different world, and it is in this that both the strengths and weaknesses of the book lie. On the one hand, he has achieved a theoretical synthesis of the basic tenets of “Fidelism” and some of the guerilla leaders elsewhere, but on the other he indulges in non sequiturs and generalisations which are at once compellingly attractive yet annoyingly overconfident.

Any evaluation of the correctness or otherwise of Debray’s thesis by someone in Australia is at best difficult and at worst impossible. Not only are we far removed from “where the action is” but it is hard to verify whether what is claimed to be true is in fact true. Given this though, a number of points can still be made:

1. This book is a step forward for the theory of revolution in Latin America. The discussion which it has provoked can only do good, and already has rejuvenated some of the hardened arteries in the Latin American left.

2. It raises anew old questions of importance to revolutionary strategy, and gives answers to these which are at variance with, for instance, the views of some Communist Parties. One of the best examples of this is where he deals with the role of the national bourgeoisie. Many Communist Parties in Latin America have at various times pursued policies of uniting with the national bourgeoisie against American imperialism. There is much controversy about this theory — indeed it might be called the bete-noir of most CP’s in the third world, and it is hard to determine what is correct for each and every situation. Undoubtedly, many Communist Parties are not firmly enough rooted in their particular national situation and attempt to import theories which come
from elsewhere. As the Italian marxist Renato Sandri says: "... any observer who looks at Latin America, can, like Fidel Castro, see the necessity for many Communist Parties to overcome rigidity of thought and action, to mature in the creativity of their own line and to take over in the heat of battle the role of vanguard which does not depend on any doctrinal investiture." However, while one can say that a policy of working with the national bourgeoisie in Latin America is hardly feasible, it is equally true that an oversimplified view of their role, as Debray sometimes seems to have, will lead to errors in other directions. Gerossi, in a speech to a London conference on the "dialectics of liberation" makes an interesting assertion about the non-existence of the national bourgeoisie in Latin America — he contends that it "thinks American" and is therefore not a good ally for revolution. This is true to the extent that the national bourgeoisie in Latin America is probably more dependent on imperialism than in other nations of the third world, yet a view which denies the possibility of any anti-imperialist role on their part would find it hard, for example, to explain recent events in Peru. Despite this, Debray's main point is well taken — there is an urgent need for some Communist Parties and other sections of the Left to overcome many illusions about the national and liberal bourgeoisie.

3 Debray has done something which has long been lacking — he has put the question of making revolution back on the agenda. One unfortunate by-product of the ossification of marxism has been a tendency for Communists to make sacrifices for years with no real perspective on how these fit into the overall goal of bringing about the revolution — Debray has then attempted to solve the problem of how to go about making the revolution here and now. This solution may not be the right one, but those who think this must set out to actually prove it — and therein lies the point.

4 Debray, and by implication Fidel Castro and the Cubans, run the danger of falling into a trap which has already proved costly to the world revolution — that of generalising their own experience as being the way for others. Whereas it is probably true that for some of the nations of Latin America the Cuban experience is relevant and Castro more right than the national CP, it is also true that it is hard to see how many of the Fidelist theories can apply to some of the more developed nations where the urban proletariat has greater strength and which fall closer to a backward European country than a colonial one in some aspects. (Debray himself mentions Uruguay in this respect.) Certainly, one can only be apprehensive at Castro's attempts to impose his own line on others, and it is questionable whether the current Cuban attitude will really help to win the other Communist Parties to
the correct revolutionary strategy, even assuming that they are wrong and Castro is right.

Finally, it must be said that Revolution in the Revolution? and Debray’s other essays are essential reading not only for anyone interested in the problems of Latin America, but for anyone who aspires to an understanding of modern revolutionary theory. It was Lenin who pointed out that in order for the masses to make revolution they must go through years of political experience, learning new lessons as they go. Perhaps many of the problems for revolutionaries in Latin America stem from the scant political experience of the masses, many of whom live in much the same ways as generations of their ancestors and prove hard ground for the sowing of revolutionary ideas — as Che Guevara found to his cost amongst the Indians of South East Bolivia. Whether, and for whom, Debray’s thesis is correct can only be decided by the course of events, but one thing is certain: revolution in Latin America is an imperative, and if to achieve it the revolution has to revolutionise itself, then the contribution of Debray to this process will ultimately be gratefully recognised, whatever the ultimate truth or falsity of its contentions.

1 Paul Johnson, of the British New Statesman, calls it “The Plundered Continent” — for source see note 2.
2 In Whither Latin America? a collection of essays published by Monthly Review Press, NY 1965 p. 12 — from the text of a speech to be given on US television. Fuentes was prevented from giving it by the refusal of the US to grant him a visa.
3 op. cit., p. 21.
4 The Great Fear in Latin America, Collier paperback, 1967.
8 An independent socialist magazine based in New York.
10 It may be that in this way they are criticising some of Castro’s conceptions, but this is pure speculation on my part and rather improbable.
12 The Eleven Months of Che — Renato Sandri — A Young Socialist publication, Sydney, 1968.
13 Published in The Dialectics of Liberation Pelican 1968 p. 85.