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LATIN AMERICA AND THE IDEAS OF REGIS DEBRAY

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THE PASSION WHICH Regis Debray feels for the cause of the Latin American revolution cannot be questioned. The savage sentence of thirty years imposed upon him by the Bolivian regime came at the end of a trial in which he distinguished himself by a bearing in the best revolutionary traditions. Although his presence amongst Che Guevara's guerillas was in the capacity of a journalist, and not a guerilla fighter, he made not the slightest effort to disengage himself from the sort of revolutionary devotion and ardour which in the end cost Che his life.

He told the Tribunal:

As a Revolutionary (to the extent to which I can be called one) I feel and I declare myself jointly responsible for all the 'crimes' committed by all revolutionaries everywhere in the world. . . .

Except for the mentally sick and the fascists, no one likes men to have to make history by killing. But if you want to talk about crimes, where are the innocent ones? . . .

Each one has to decide which side he is on—on the side of military violence or guerilla violence, on the side of violence that represses or violence that liberates . . . you chose certain ones and I chose others.¹

Nothing—no critique, no adverse assessment—should deflect any of us from the duty to press in every way possible for the liberty of Debray and the other freedom fighters who languish in the jails of Barrientos.

There is yet another reason it may be argued, why this is not the most propitious moment to sit back and reflect on Debray the theoretician. In part his presence in Bolivia appears to have been for the purpose of equipping himself more fully on the problem of the place

¹ Quoted in *Granma* January 28th, 1968.

of guerilla warfare in Latin American conditions. For the moment we are, regrettably, deprived of his further reflections and comments on the theoretical polemics which he has helped to spark off.

In the light of these factors ought we, even temporarily, to be deflected from subjecting the tendencies evident in Debray's approach to the strictest scrutiny? Certainly not. Neither Debray nor any other serious revolutionary would countenance such a patronising approach. And the reason is crystal clear. Outside of a university seminar or a magazine polemic (though many so-called 'Lefts' and 'Revolutionaries' do their most intensive struggling at this level) the influence of theories of struggle, their adoption or rejection, is often literally a matter of life and death for thousands of militants or indeed a whole movement.

Debray himself alludes to this when he points to the fact that the undigested lessons of the Cuban experience

gave rise to half a hundred revolutionary organisations on the margin of the Communist Party resolved on direct action. Several years of revolutionary action have now made it clear that heroism is not enough, and that ideological maturity and above all, political sense, absence of sectarianism and seriousness in preparing armed struggle were lacking. . . . Prisoners of the Cuban model, these so-called Fidelista organisations perished.²

There is yet another reason why we must be hard taskmasters. Whether intended by Debray or not, his texts are projected in many quarters, not as a tentative commentary or as food for thought (which some of his propositions are), but as an authoritative formulation of the views of Cuba's leaders. In the words of the editors of *Monthly Review*³

Regis Debray though writing only in his capacity as a private student of revolutionary theory and practice, has succeeded in presenting to the world an accurate and profound account of the thinking of the leaders of the Cuban Revolution on these subjects. . . . We have here for the first time a comprehensive and authoritative presentation of the revolutionary thought of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.

One could argue that this claim is exaggerated. For example, on the most important question of the role of the political vanguard (to which I shall return), there seems on the face of it a divergence between the view of Debray and that contained in the report of the Cuban delegation to the August 1967 OLAS Conference and the remarks by Fidel Castro in his closing speech.

² 'Problems of Revolutionary Strategy in Latin America'—*New Left Review*, No. 45, p. 23.

³ *Monthly Review*, July-August 1967. Foreword by Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy to *Revolution in the Revolution*.

Nevertheless, a general belief that Debray's thinking is so closely associated with that of the Cuban Revolution, lends prestige to his propositions.

The editors of *New Left Review* in their introductory notes to Debray's article 'Problems of Revolutionary Strategy in Latin America' go further. They describe some of his fundamental propositions as 'authentically Leninist' and generally project his thinking as embodying the true essence of Bolshevik strategy and its renovation for Latin American conditions.

In the light of these claims, which have undoubtedly influenced the thinking of many militants both within and outside Latin America, it becomes even more necessary to subject his thesis to a searching examination.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CUBA

In doing this we must not overlook the fact that Debray was tackling a Continent in the context of an event which marks an absolute watershed in the history of revolutionary struggles in Latin America—the Cuban Revolution. This historic event did more than liberate the Cuban people from the Batista dictatorship and set Cuba along the path of socialist construction. In a sense, it was Latin America's 'October'. It became the contemporary symbol for all in Latin America of the successful revolutionary struggle, the catalyst of a thorough-going reappraisal of many of the fundamental problems of the Latin American revolution—a process which is as yet incomplete.

Old clichés and the dogmatic invocation of 'eternal' rules of revolutionary struggle, stood in the way of the evolution of a strategy which accorded with the reality of Latin American conditions. Francisco Mieres, a leading Venezuelan communist, writing in *World Marxist Review*⁴ put it as follows:

Unfortunately we received the legacy of October which became the basis of our revolutionary movement, rather tailored and distorted. . . . This was one of the reasons why our theoretical work was not distinguished for either richness or originality. It did not draw on the reality of our countries nor did it have the ability for genuine self-regeneration. The Cuban Revolution challenged everything, upset everything, stripped the sacred sham-truisms from the altar and subjected everything to criticism (not always correctly let it be said) and gave rise to doubts, confusion and over-simplification. But out of this chaos would come ultimately the Latin American theory of revolution.

Amongst the more significant discussions of revolutionary theory which the Cuban revolution helped to spark off, were the questions

⁴ *World Marxist Review*, No. 11, 1967.

of the revolutionary potentialities of the national bourgeoisie, the much vexed question of alliances, fronts and so on, the role of the vanguard, as well as the question of the maturing of a revolutionary situation. More particularly it raised the problem of the extent to which the subjective factor can either utilise or create the revolutionary situation.

For example, Che Guevara in his book *Guerilla Warfare* wrote 'The Cuban Revolution reveals that . . . one does not necessarily have to wait for a revolutionary situation to arise: it can be created'. This conclusion refutes 'those who feel the need to wait until, in some perfect way, all the required objective and subjective conditions are at hand, instead of hastening to bring these conditions about through their own efforts'.

An interesting commentary on this problem is contained in a paper by Dr. Grigory Glezerman—'Correlation of the Objective Conditions and the Subjective Factor in the light of the experience of the October Revolution' in which one of his main conclusions is stated as follows:

'It is impossible to agree with the opinion of some authors that in present-day conditions the maturing of a revolutionary situation increasingly depends on the maturity of the political army of the revolution, on the strategy and tactics of the Party and other elements of the subjective factor. . . . Determined action of the revolutionary forces, supported by the masses, can be merely the impetus which speeds the maturing of the revolutionary situation, but only if sufficient combustible material has accumulated in a country, if there are objective conditions creating a revolutionary situation. The idea that the boldness and determination of the revolutionary vanguard are sufficient to rouse the masses to revolution, is a dangerous illusion.'⁵

Drawing on the Cuban experience, Debray generalises more or less as follows (and more or less for the whole of Latin America):

- (a) What he calls 'Fidelism' is, according to him, characterised in the first place by 'its refusal of the *coup d'état*'.⁶ He makes the point that whatever the forces that initially support it, a government brought to power by a putsch necessarily tends to the right. The fact that the army is, to a greater extent than previously, recruited from sections of the lower middle class, has led to the theory⁷ that the army becomes a 'social microcosm

⁵ *Voprosi Filosofi*, No. 11, 1967.

⁶ One might add that this has always been the traditional approach of Leninism.

⁷ It is not altogether clear to which groups Debray alludes as endorsing this theory. To my knowledge not a single contemporary communist party in Latin America regards the *coup d'état* as a substitute for revolutionary struggle.

which reflects the contradictions of the national macrocosm'. But, 'it is an absolute rule that one cannot base a strategy or even a tactical episode of the struggle upon the decision of a regiment or a garrison'.⁸

(b) At the opposite end to those who advocate 'revolutionary putschism' (Blanquism as applied to the actions of a military rather than a civilian minority), are the advocates of 'pure mass action'. The 'cautious truism' that revolution requires the conscious entry of the masses into the struggle is, Debray claims, proffered by many communist leaderships without an indication from them of *how* to awaken the masses in regions whose repressive instruments make political activity virtually impossible except amongst 'the narrow stratum of urban intelligentsia'.⁹

(c) What then is to be done? Debray answers: 'Fidelism replies in terms which are similar to those of Lenin in 1902. . . . In Fidelist terms, this is the theory of the Foco',¹⁰ of 'the insurrectionary centre'. In short the answer lies in the creation of insurrectionary centres and not waiting for all the conditions for revolution to be fulfilled. In Latin America the creation of an insurrectionary centre can create conditions for revolution. Also in Latin American conditions, urban insurrections can be crushed too easily, hence the terrain of armed struggle must basically be in the countryside.

These formulations contain a mixture of truths, half-truths and impermissible generalisations.

In so far as they are based on the assumption that the strategic road in Latin America lies in the direction of armed struggle, they say little that is new.¹¹

PRESUMPTUOUS ATTITUDE

In contrast to Debray's more engaging qualities, one is unpleasantly affected by his arrogant attitude to most Latin American Communists, who have behind them a lifetime of struggle and sacrifice, an experience

⁸ 'Latin America: The Long March' (*New Left Review*, September-October 1965, p. 20).

⁹ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁰ An armed minority which 'establishes itself at the most vulnerable zone of the national territory, and then slowly spreads like an oil patch, propagating itself in concentric ripples through the peasant masses to the smaller towns, and finally to the capital'. (Ibid., p. 27.)

¹¹ Francisco Mieres (*W.M.R.*, November 1967): 'As regards the general strategic road in Latin America, there exists practically complete unanimity. Armed struggle here is the rule and the peaceful way the exception'.

and knowledge of their countries which no outsider could hope to rival. He depicts the bulk of the Communist Party leaderships in the area as sitting back and waiting for the evolution of a revolutionary situation without any realist plan of how to awaken the masses. The broad sweep of his advice to revolutionaries in every part of this huge and varied Continent¹² is quite overpowering in its presumptuousness.

He dismisses with sarcastic contempt the slogan adopted by the Argentinian Communist Party at its Twelfth Congress—'Towards the Conquest of Power through the Action of the Masses!'¹³ but has no positive alternative of his own. His general formula has no validity here, for Debray himself concedes that in Argentina, with its urban concentration of 75 per cent of the population, a rural insurrectionary centre 'can only have a subordinate role', that nothing can be achieved without the active participation of the urban workers, that a general strike, short of insurrection 'tends to be broken by violence'.¹⁴ There are generalised clichés about armed struggle and preparation for such struggle. But if, as he emphasises repeatedly, urban insurrections have become a virtual impossibility; if 'pure mass action' is spurned, what future is there for the Argentinian masses? What is the answer to the crucial question of the strategy for the transfer of power in Argentina? Debray sheds little light on this. It would be surprising, if in fact, as a stranger to the situation, he was qualified or able to provide effective guidance on these questions.

Nor is this the only case where his sweeping generalisations, by his own admission, fail to meet the test of application to specific countries.

In Uruguay, Debray says, there are no conditions for armed struggle.

One does not know whether he agrees with the formulation of the Cuban delegation at the August 1967 OLAS Conference, when it stated that in the case of Chile it would be 'foolish and absurd' to speak of guerilla warfare.

He dismisses as 'irrational optimism' the thesis contained in the Chilean Communist Party programme approved at its twelfth Congress in March 1962, that 'the present correlation of national and international forces has increased the possibility of achieving revolu-

¹² Most of South America is predominantly rural, but the rate of urbanisation is growing and in many countries is already significantly high. By 1960 Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Cuba and Venezuela had urban majorities, and by 1970 it is anticipated that Colombia, Peru and even Brazil will be added to this list. See article 'Peasants and Rural Migrants' by E. J. Hobsbawm in *The Politics of Conformity*.

¹³ *New Left Review*, No. 33, p. 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

tion without armed struggle'. If it is 'foolish and absurd' to talk of armed struggle in Chile and it is 'irrational optimism' to envisage the possibility of achieving revolution without armed struggle, what is the answer? Again, as in the case of Argentina, flamboyant talk about reformism, opportunism and bourgeois election tactics is combined with an absence of guidance for those who actually have to do the struggling in Chile.

Writing in 1965,¹⁵ he says of Bolivia, that it is the only country where the subjective and objective conditions are best combined. It is 'the only country in South America where a socialist revolution is on the agenda' and it is also 'the *only* country where the revolution might take the classical Bolshevik form' [my emphasis]. He therefore draws the conclusion that the theory of the 'Foco' is, for Bolivia, 'if not inadequate, at any rate secondary'. Yet, it could not have been so long after this statement that Bolivia was chosen as the region where Che Guevara was to devote his considerable talent to the precise purpose of creating guerilla Foci.

In the face of his sweeping prescriptions for most of the regions of this vast continent, it is rather baffling to read the following written by him in 1965:¹⁶

Armed struggle absolutely cannot be brandished in Latin America as a categorical imperative or a remedy in itself: armed struggle conducted by whom, one may ask, when, where, with what programme, what alliances? These are concrete problems which no one in the world can resolve abstractly—only the national vanguard which alone carry the weight of the political responsibilities. In other words, the Foco cannot constitute a strategy in itself without condemning itself to failure. It is a moment of struggle whose place can only be defined within an overall integrating strategy.

This is not the only place in the works of Debray where a general proposition is proffered which, either in the very same article or in a subsequent article, is contradicted without any explanation.

For a vanguard to be able to carry out its political responsibilities more is needed than generalised theoretical structures, formal statistical and analytical equipment. It requires assessments by indigenous political activists who know and understand not only the demonstrable facts but who, in addition, have a 'feel' for their people, a sensitivity to their mood and the sort of revolutionary instinct which enables them at every given stage to differentiate between the possible and the fanciful. Surely no outsider can hope to legislate with such aplomb for the different countries, otherwise we will not avoid the

¹⁵ 'Latin America: The Long March'. *New Left Review*, No. 33, p. 26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

same sort of vulgarisation with the so-called 'Cuban model' as occurred with the 'October model'.

CONDITIONS FOR REVOLUTION

In a famous formula (in *'Left-Wing' Communism—an Infantile Disorder*) Lenin stated a 'fundamental law' of revolution as follows:

It is not enough for revolution that the exploited and the oppressed masses should understand the impossibility of living in the old way and demand changes, it is essential for revolution that the exploiters should not be able to live and rule in the old way . . . revolution is impossible without a nation-wide crisis (affecting both the exploited and the exploiters).

There may well be substance in Debray's claim that inappropriate and mechanical adherence to this formulation, regardless of changing and different conditions, may have acted as an obstacle to revolutionary initiatives by some vanguard parties. Lenin was here discussing the problems of a general insurrection, and not the way in which a revolutionary organisation can, by its political and organisational work, help create favourable objective conditions for the conquest of power. But this has not always been appreciated.

In some countries (including Cuba) the commencement of armed struggle which led to eventual victory was undertaken by groups outside the Communist ranks and in some cases with initial opposition from Communist Parties. There is no doubt (and again Cuba is proof of this) that given certain minimum pre-conditions, the actual commencement and sustaining of guerilla activities operates as an extremely important factor in hastening the evolvment of insurrectionary conditions. In this sense to sit back and wait for the evolvment of the classical objective conditions which constitute a 'revolutionary situation', amounts, in some cases, to a dereliction of leadership duties.

At the same time it is a dangerous illusion, fostered by so many of Debray's expansive and over-generalised formulations, that the injection of armed groups into a country in which there is severe repression will of itself (and subject only to the professional skill of the armed groups) 'slowly spread like an oil patch'.

This neo-Blanquist¹⁷ approach is given emphasis by Debray's

¹⁷ *Blanquism*—a trend in the French socialist movement headed by Louis August Blanqui (1805-1881). The classics of Marxism-Leninism, while regarding Blanqui as an outstanding revolutionary and adherent of socialism, criticised him for his sectarianism and conspiratorial methods. The Blanquists repudiated the class struggle, expecting the 'emancipation of mankind from wage slavery to be brought about not by means of the class struggle of the proletariat, but through a conspiracy of a small minority of intellectuals' (Lenin).

astounding proposition that the guerilla band must initially shun the civilian peasant population and aim at knocking out the troops of the enemy. He gives as one of his reasons the cultural disparity between the guerillas (mainly students and intellectuals) and the peasants. Can anything be more indicative of the false thesis that the heroic deeds of the revolutionary élite of students and intellectuals will of itself win over the masses and create the objective conditions for the successful transfer of power?

Debray says that the most serious mistake would be to see in the Foco a revival of Blanquism. 'It is a minority certainly, but one which unlike a Blanquist minority of activists, aims to win over the masses before and not after the seizure of power and which makes this the essential condition of the final conquest of power.' Also it is distinguished from Blanquism, because 'it does not in any way aim at a lightning victory or even for a rapid outcome of the revolutionary war.'¹⁸ Is there any reason in principle why we should not aim for a rapid outcome of the revolutionary war?

For all his protestations that his theory of the 'Foco' differs fundamentally from Blanquism, there is an extremely important area in which both approaches have a common root—the belief that the actions of the small heroic and dedicated group will on its own stimulate mass support.

This is not a chance departure from Marxist-Leninist concepts relating to the strategy and tactics of revolutionary struggles. It forms part of a consistent pattern arising from Debray's approach to the place of revolutionary theory in the revolutionary struggle, the character of the political vanguard and its relationship to armed struggle.

THE ARMY AND THE PARTY

Debray's fundamental thesis—the crux of his analysis—is on the relationship between the 'Foco' and the political vanguard:

No part of the guerilla movement has attempted to organise a new party; it seeks rather to wipe out doctrinal or party divisions amongst its own combatants. . . . The most decisive political choice is membership in the guerilla forces, in the Armed Forces of Liberation.¹⁹

When he talks of the 'Foco' having the right to constitute itself as the vanguard independently of the Marxist-Leninist Parties, he has in mind this sort of broad grouping which differs basically from the vanguard concept in Leninism.

Thus to the question, Can the Party under existing Latin American conditions create the Popular Army or is it up to the Popular Army to

¹⁸ 'Latin America: The Long March'. *New Left Review*, No. 33, pp. 27-8.

¹⁹ *Revolution in the Revolution*, pp. 104-5.

create the Vanguard? he answers unequivocally 'Eventually the future people's army will beget the party of which it is to be, theoretically the instrument: essentially the party is the army'.²⁰

He makes it absolutely clear that his conclusion is not primarily based on a passing state of affairs in which existing vanguards have, as he claims, been ineffective in creating the popular army, *but in the phase preceding the seizure of power, the predominance of the political vanguard, the party, over the military, is not valid for Latin America.*²¹ *'The people's army will be the nucleus of the party, not vice versa.'*²²

He partly attempts to support this proposition by referring in some detail to what he considers to be the harmful effects on the practical conduct of the military struggle, of the existence of two leadership groups—the military and the political. He wrongly suggests that these harmful effects are completely unavoidable when the political vanguard has overall direction of the armed struggle.

But in the main, his conclusions flow logically from what he has said previously on a number of fundamental questions in the course of which it becomes clear that his approach stands in direct conflict with basic and fundamental (not just tactical) principles of Marxism and Leninism. There are of course no 'sacred cows'. That it conflicts with a tenet of Leninism does not automatically condemn a proposition. But when Debray himself and his protagonists claim authority from Lenin in support of his thesis, we are entitled to question this. If it stands in conflict with Leninism we are further entitled to ask whether he has advanced sufficient analysis and argument to make us doubt the historically tested, impressive and profound doctrines of Leninism.

ANTI-LENINIST APPROACH

What has led Debray to the repudiation of the Leninist political vanguard in this stage prior to the seizure of power? It is in the first place his anti-Leninist approach to the whole question of ideology and the role of theory in revolutionary struggle. Witness for example the following references from *Revolution in the Revolution*:

One may well consider it a stroke of good luck that Fidel had not read the military writings of Mao Tse-tung before disembarking on the coast of Oriente (p. 20).

In that sense (that the Latin American revolutionary war possesses highly special and profoundly distinct conditions of development) all the theoretical works on peoples' war does as much harm as good (p. 21).

The sending of cadres to schools for political studies and the flanking of the military cadres with 'political commissars' is bound to hamper the

²⁰ Ibid., p. 98.

²¹ Ibid., p. 91 and following.

²² Ibid., p. 116.

natural emergence of popular leaders, of well-rounded military-political leaders (p. 90).

The best teacher of Marxism-Leninism is the enemy, in face to face confrontation during the peoples' war. Study and apprenticeship are necessary, but not decisive. There are no academy-trained cadres (p. 111).

This is quite clearly not just an appeal for a combination of practice with theory, but a denigration of the correct Leninist principle that (historical accidents apart), the leadership of a political struggle (and a peoples' armed struggle is a political struggle by techniques which include organised violence) requires a thorough grasp and understanding of scientific theory. To say that 'the best teacher of Marxism-Leninism is the enemy in face to face confrontation' is a piece of rhetorical nonsense.

This competitive contrast between revolutionary theory and revolutionary practice; this rejection of the true role of theory and its place in a revolutionary struggle, stems from the quite incorrect assumption that the scientific principles of Marxism-Leninism grow naturally and almost spontaneously out of struggle. A clue that this is what Debray believes is contained in the following statement:

There is a further reason why Fidelism lays a greater stress on revolutionary practice, when it is honest and sincere, than on ideological labels: this is the belief that in the special conditions of South America the dynamism of nationalist struggles brings them to a conscious adoption of Marxism.²³

I emphasise this because if Debray is correct in his contention that the acceptance of correct ideology and scientific socialism will arise, in the special conditions of Latin America²⁴ from the very process of struggle, then indeed, it is not vital to start off with a theoretical grasp of scientific principles nor a vanguard party to propagate them. The struggle will create all this.

But this belief that a people or a class which is engaged 'in honest and sincere revolutionary practice' will of necessity arrive at the correct ideological termini, is an old illusion advanced in the revolutionary movement not for the first time. It was at the nub of the thesis of the Russian 'Economists' and their German Revisionist counterparts.

Many of our Revisionist critics believe that Marx asserted that economic development and the class struggle create not only the conditions for socialist production, but also, and directly, the consciousness of its necessity. . . . The proletariat becomes conscious of the possibility and of the

²³ 'Latin America: The Long March'. *New Left Review*, No. 33, p. 54.

²⁴ The special conditions referred to are that 'The struggle against imperialism does not take the form of a front against foreign forces of occupation, but proceeds by means of revolutionary civil war'.

necessity for socialism. In this connection socialist consciousness appears to be a necessary and direct result of the proletarian class struggle. But this is absolutely untrue. Of course, socialism as a doctrine has its roots in modern economic relationships just as the class struggle of the proletariat has . . . But socialism and the class struggle arise side by side and not out of the other; each arises under different conditions. Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge. . . . There can be no talk of an independent ideology being developed by the masses of the workers themselves in the process of the movement. . . . There is a lot of talk about spontaneity but the spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its becoming subordinated to the bourgeois ideology.²⁵

And if it is true of workers in direct conflict with their class enemy that, left to themselves, they tend towards bourgeois rather than proletarian ideology, how much more true is this of a struggle whose main content is national in character. What is there special about Latin America that Debray can claim that there as a general rule, 'the Party . . . will be formed and its cadres will be selected through the natural processes of the liberation struggle as happened in Cuba.'²⁶

We may note that even in Cuba the Communist Party was not a pure product of the natural processes of the struggle initiated by the July 26th Movement, but came into existence as a result of an amalgamation of the July 26th Movement and the Peoples' Socialist Party (old Communist Party) which in all the works of Debray is mentioned only once, and that in a footnote.

He describes the coming into being of the Cuban Communist Party as follows: 'The Party is the same age as the Revolution, it will be fourteen on July 26th, 1967. Moncada was the nucleus of the rebel army which was in turn the nucleus of the party. Around this nucleus and only because it already had its own political-military leadership, other political forces have been able to assemble and unite forming what is today the Communist Party of Cuba.'²⁷ Ignored completely is the fact that the PSP over a period of many years had done a great deal to prepare the ground for the socialist revolution.

Debray does say that his theory applies only to the preparatory stage of the seizure of power and that a communist party becomes indispensable only after victory for the construction of socialism. He argues that an anti-imperialist national liberation struggle in a colonial or semi-colonial territory cannot be conducted under the banner of Marxism-Leninism or the leadership of the working class 'for obvious reasons'.²⁸

²⁵ Lenin: *What is to be Done?* (approvingly quoting Karl Kautsky).

²⁶ 'Latin America: The Long March.' *New Left Review*, No. 33, p. 38.

²⁷ *Revolution in the Revolution*, p. 106.

²⁸ 'Latin America: The Long March.' *New Left Review*, No. 33, p. 38.

As a general proposition this is neither obvious nor correct. The banner of Marxism-Leninism in the type of territory referred to is precisely anti-imperialism and national liberation. And where there is a sufficiently developed working class, there is every reason why it should either on its own or in alliance (as in Vietnam) lead the national liberation struggle.

Lenin says of armed struggle that it 'must be ennobled by the enlightened and organising influence of socialism. And without this latter condition *every* [Lenin's emphasis], positively every, method of struggle in bourgeois society approximates the proletariat to the position of the various non-proletarian strata above and below it, and if left to the spontaneous course of events, becomes frayed, corrupted and prostituted'.²⁹

Debray draws attention to what he describes as a significant detail: 'During the two years of warfare, Fidel did not hold a single political rally in his zone of operations'.³⁰ We cannot presume to question the wisdom of this approach by Castro in the specific circumstances which faced him. The example is, however, invoked to counterpose the superiority of revolutionary practice over revolutionary theory, action against propaganda—as if these were exclusive concepts instead of being interwoven and complementary.

There is, in any case, evidence that the Cuban leaders do not altogether go along with Debray's rejection of the vanguard, his militaristic approach to political struggle in Latin America and his dismissal of almost every form of struggle short of violence (or preparation for it) as non-revolutionary. In his closing address to the August 1967 OLAS Conference, Castro insisted that 'the guerilla war must be organised by a political movement, by a political organisation' and the report of the Cuban delegation contained the following: 'The fact that the people's army is organised in the country and that the development of a mass peasant movement is of fundamental importance, does not mean that the leadership of the struggle must not be guided by a proletarian ideology. On the contrary, the ideas of the proletariat (and its best cadres) must be at the head of this struggle. *We are dealing with a war waged in the country, but not with a peasant war*' [emphasis in text].

THE VANGUARD CLASSES

Having 'renovated' Bolshevik strategy to the point at which one of its most fundamental tenets—the role of a Marxist-Leninist vanguard armed with scientific theory—is, in effect, completely denied

²⁹ Lenin: *Partisan Warfare*.

³⁰ *Revolution in the Revolution*, p. 54.

prior to the conquest of power, the next step is a rejection of the traditional Marxist-Leninist concept of the working class as a vanguard class in the revolutionary struggle (which Lenin described as 'the main thing in the doctrine of Marx').³¹ His claim that 'the Cuban Revolution has established that in the insurrectionary phase of the revolution, while it is indispensable to have some sort of organisation and a firm political leadership (July 26th Movement), it is possible to do without a vanguard Marxist-Leninist Party of the working class' is in harmony with his generalised contention that in Latin American conditions the revolutionary struggle cannot be led by the working class.

This contention has its roots not only in the incorrect claim that a working class cannot lead an anti-imperialist national liberation struggle in a colonial or semi-colonial country, but, it appears, that it is the very character of the urban proletariat which makes it generally unfit to lead a revolutionary armed struggle. The city, says Debray, can 'bourgeoisify' the proletarians while the mountain 'as we know' 'proletarianises' the bourgeoisie and the peasants. The tactical conflicts in a movement conceal a class conflict in which the interests of the proletariat are not 'paradoxically enough on the side which one would expect'.³² He quotes Che Guevara as saying that the rebel army is already ideologically proletarian and thinks like a dispossessed class whilst the city remains petty bourgeois, contains future traitors amongst its leaders and is very influenced by the milieu in which it develops.

Debray in his denigration of the role of the proletariat may well have been influenced by the theoretical writing of Frantz Fanon.³³ But unlike Fanon, he does not proceed to the conclusion that the peasantry is the vanguard class since, the

illiterate peasants . . . suffocated by centuries of 'social peace' under a feudal regime . . . cannot be awakened or acquire political consciousness by a process of thought, reflection and reading. . . . They will be followers of 'propaganda by facts'.³⁴

Since the national bourgeoisie has been excluded from playing any significant role, to which class falls the role of vanguard in the revolutionary struggle? It appears that in Latin America the 'irony of history willed . . . the assignment of . . . this vanguard role to students and revolutionary intellectuals who have to unleash or rather initiate the

³¹ Lenin: *Marx-Engels Marxism*.

³² Debray: *Revolution in the Revolution*, pp. 76-7.

³³ Frantz Fanon: *Wretched of the Earth*.

³⁴ 'Latin America: The Long March.' *New Left Review*, No. 33, p. 41.

highest form of class struggle'³⁵ and 'The students are in the vanguard of the revolution in Latin America'. This latter fact makes it possible, according to Debray, to set up secondary centres of armed struggle in the towns not, *mark you*, amongst the working class, but in the universities.³⁶

On this question of the role of the proletariat as well as on the questions already considered of ideology and the vanguard party, Debray betrays a sort of static empiricism which denudes much of what he says of its value.

Although he correctly expresses a distaste for the setting up of 'revolutionary models' whether it be Russian, Chinese or Cuban (he even expresses the hope that the word 'Fidelism' will disappear)³⁷ the overall impact of his thesis is precisely to set up the Cuban experience as a model for all in Latin America. Such an approach may well continue to encourage many militants to embark on the type of action which, he concedes, has already led to the destruction of half a hundred revolutionary organisations.

The Cuban revolution and its leadership has made an incalculable contribution to the storehouse of revolutionary theory and practice. But in assessing the Cuban experience two errors must be avoided. The one is the rejection of some of its vital lessons on the parrot-cry, 'but Cuba was different'. The other is an inability to determine what in the Cuban revolution has universal, and what has purely local, application.

Both in regard to the Cuban Revolution and other major revolutionary experiences of the twentieth century, Debray tends to confuse the general with the particular. Thus, having correctly spoken about the harm which the unthinking application of the 'October' model did, he proceeds to discuss modern revolutionary processes as if the whole of Lenin's theoretical contribution on this vital question is an anachronism for most of Latin America. In the same way having correctly differentiated the conditions of the struggle in China and Vietnam from those applying in Latin America, he shows an inability to extract from these revolutions the valid theoretical lessons which have universal application.

Surely one of the most fundamental lessons of all these enriching experiences is the *absolute* necessity of revolutionary political leadership guided by a grasp of scientific revolutionary theory. Of course, just as history continues to move even if man is ignorant of its laws, so revolutions and armed struggle have occurred, and will continue

³⁵ *Revolution in the Revolution*, p. 21.

³⁶ 'Latin America: The Long March.' *New Left Review*, No. 33, p. 31.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

to occur, in given objective conditions even in the absence of a vanguard party or a single person who understands scientific theory. But if Leninism has taught us anything it is surely this: the existence of such a vanguard group equipped with knowledge and an understanding of the science of struggle not only speeds up the process but makes more certain that the fruits of victory are not snatched away. How many 'people's' armed struggles have we seen in recent decades in which most of the participants were 'honest and sincere' and ready to die and yet the 'natural' process of the struggle generated either a militarist dictatorship or gave birth to right-wing regimes.

With Rousseau-like romanticism Debray insists that 'by a collective working of the soil' and so on the guerillas are forced to 'proletarianise' themselves morally and ideologically. 'It is almost impossible' says Debray 'that a Foco, the embryo of a popular army, should develop militarist tendencies.' This is not analysis but rhetoric. It is a rare and almost accidental phenomenon that revolutionary struggles, whether armed or not, lead to the sort of victory all of us desire without the guidance of a political revolutionary vanguard of the Leninist type.

That is why we must reject the new dogma which Debray advances that in most of Latin America 'at the present juncture, the principal stress must be laid on the development of guerilla warfare and not on the strengthening of existing parties or the creation of new parties'.³⁸ The absence of a vanguard or its weakness is undoubtedly one of the prime factors in determining whether subjective conditions for the effective development of guerilla warfare exist. In any case why must we regard the two tasks as being so mutually contradictory? Only on Debray's false thesis that a 'real party' can only arise from a guerilla force which 'is the political vanguard *in nuce*'.³⁹

A VANGUARD IS ESSENTIAL

It is, of course, true that the fact that the word 'Communist' is part of an organisation's name does not automatically transform it into a vanguard, nor can it claim exclusive ownership of the revolution, except by the calibre of its leadership and actions. The failures and mistakes of some parties in no way detracts from the fact that a political vanguard is indispensable. It is neither Debray nor any other stranger to a situation who has the capacity to carry the burden of deciding the question of the commencement of any specific form of action and to guide its development. Debray's passionate appeal for action everywhere—which really amounts to an exhortation for

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 116.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 116.

every man to become his own Castro—falls into the category of a cure which is more pernicious than the disease.

The fact that individual revolutionary geniuses arise who are capable, almost instinctively, of applying correct principles to a given situation even without knowledge of them (as Debray claims of Castro and his group) in no way invalidates the Leninist thesis of the vanguard. The invocation of the Cuban example in support of the generalised contention that in Latin America the Popular Army gives birth to the vanguard and not vice versa, is a fallacy. The precise way in which the two streams of the leadership of the Cuban Revolution—the PSP and the July 26th Movement—eventually merged to form the present Communist Party of Cuba, requires detailed historical description which is not evident in Debray's work. But to deal with the Cuban situation as if the history of the struggle for workers' power began in 1957, is to do violence to truth.

Revolution is a complex and challenging art. Its tactical and strategic tasks do not remain static but depend on the never-ceasing interplay and positioning of class forces both internationally and nationally, the interaction of objective and subjective factors and so on. *To put it at its lowest we must doubt the adequacy of the 'Foco', isolated from the masses both in town and countryside and unified only by war and its immediate political objectives, to give overall political guidance.*

The impressive points made by Debray on the disadvantages of attempting to conduct the tactical aspects of the guerilla struggle from the cities or on the need for the political leadership, or sections of it, to join the armed groups, do not form a legitimate basis for the liquidation or the disregard of national vanguards. It in no way follows, as Debray believes, that the man wielding the gun is the most suited to determine overall revolutionary strategy.

Who gives guidance to the peasantry? Who mobilises the urban workers in support of the armed struggle? Who decides, in relation to the total situation, the course of the armed struggle including the need that may arise to intensify it—or even temporarily, to call it off? The 'Foco', almost by definition is on its own incapable of this because of lack of contact with the total situation, and because, certainly in the initial stages, it has no cohesive ideological basis.

A contrary view can only be sustained by a false belief that only *he* is 'making' the revolution who physically confronts the enemy with a gun in hand. Not only does this approach distort the place of armed struggle in integrated overall revolutionary strategy, but it is based on the mystical belief that the 'people' will inevitably and without ideological and organisational preparation, follow the example of the 'heroic group'. In addition it incorporates the fallacy that this

heroic group will, through the baptism of fire, evolve towards Marxism and stand ready to be the Marxist-Leninist vanguard when the construction of socialism is on the agenda.

This sort of military economism has nothing in common with Leninism—a name under which it parades. It is presumptuous because it seeks to give a flood of over-generalised advice to almost a whole continent. It is harmful because it gives birth to, and nurtures the subjective illusion that revolutions can be ‘made’ rather than led. Above all, in its emphasis on the primacy of revolutionary practice over revolutionary theory it is anti-scientific because it destroys the harmony which should be aimed for between the two and replaces it with a crude sort of determinism which has very little in common with Leninism.