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Focoism vs. Peoples War: Problems of Exaggerated Universality

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Peru's Shining Path -- armed Maoist villagers,
not special elites of "heroic guerrillas"

By Mike Ely

Tell No Lies posted a [criticism](#) of the [article I wrote](#) evaluating Che Guevara. And I think he gets at some important things.

In this exchange, I hope to argue for a few core ideas:

1) We should deepen our understanding of the importance of contrasting ideological and political line.

This means examining policies and ideas in terms of where they lead — toward what? Toward revolution and communism, or somewhere else?

Che was an important revolutionary figure who became a truly unique global symbol of armed struggle and internationalism. But we should pursue a critical evaluation of the LINE he represented as well.

2) We should embrace a deeper understanding of the mass line – the principle that revolution must be the act of the people themselves (and that a *socialist* revolution requires an embrace of communist organization and consciousness within a larger, active, emerging “revolutionary people” — an actual section of the people.)

3) We need a renewed materialist appreciation of particularity — the relative uniqueness of each moment and place. I.e. we need to be wary of that casual universalization of strategic ideas that often burdened previous generations of revolutionaries.

It is important to study revolutionary victories (and defeats) for lessons and applicable insights. But there is a history of much too lightly declaring that the specific forms of one revolution are “models” or “universal principles” for other places. This has played a rather destructive role — both in the sense that it had real (often fatal) results, but also in the sense of deadening the creative theoretical impulses of living movements. And this kind of universalization was done by codifying both focoist theory *and* the Chinese experience of protracted peoples war into universal models.

As the Nepali Maoists insist, you can’t copy previous revolutions. Each struggle and victory will have a great deal of innovation and shocking particularity. Future revolutions will prove to be as startlingly different as [snowflakes](#).

Now to return to evaluating Che Guevara and TNL’s comments.



Foco’s Failure is Not Vindication of Rival Theories

The theory of Foquismo (or focoism) took the experience of the Cuban revolution and tried to extend it as a universal model or formula (in countries where conditions were quite different).

It was a disaster for a whole generation of Latin American revolutionaries (including for Che's last foco in Bolivia, but then many more that followed him.)

Tell No Lies writes:

“While Foquismo proved universally to be a disaster and, as Alastair notes, is not even an accurate account of the Cuban experience, I think the formulation presented here that views Che chiefly through the lens of Foquismo vs. Protracted Peoples War (PPW) and then faults Che's followers with failing to embrace PPW fails to ask whether PPW actually makes sense in Latin America and if so why it hasn't been able to gain traction despite its evident influence on the thinking of lots of groups, including a number that started out as foquistas”.

I agree — the failure of focoism is not proof of the correctness of rival theories — including protracted peoples war, but also caudillo strategies of “colonels' coups” or parliamentary strategies of “historic compromise.”

I agree that the Chinese model of “Protracted Peoples War” (PPW) has also been often (and globally) promoted as a rival universalism — as if it applies everywhere. In fact it doesn't and hasn't. And more, with the rise of massive urban areas in the Third World, most countries look less and less like 1930s China — with important strategic implications.

Mao's Deep Creative Appreciation of the China's Distinctness

Mao Zedong actually introduces his strategy of PPW with a discussion of what is UNIQUE in China ([“Why Is it That Red Political Power Can Exist in China?”](#)).

“The long-term survival inside a country of one or more small areas under Red political power completely encircled by a White regime is a phenomenon that has never occurred anywhere else in the world. There are special reasons for this unusual phenomenon. It can exist and develop only under certain conditions. First, it cannot occur in any imperialist country or in any colony under direct imperialist rule, but can only occur in China which is economically backward, and which is semi-colonial and under indirect imperialist rule. For this unusual phenomenon can occur only in conjunction with another unusual phenomenon, namely, war within the White regime.”

Among the special condition Mao mentions are that China is fought over by rival powers, it has a huge hinterland where maneuver is possible, the internal power was broken up by rival warlords, and politics generally took the form of one armed group confronting another armed group, a weak central state apparatus. In other words, Mao cited the many PARTICULAR conditions in China — and used that to argue against the PREVIOUS assumed universality (the Russian's October road of armed insurrections in the cities.)

Mao's work was an affirmation of anomaly with in a movement of increasingly enforced universality.

While the Chinese experience clearly has relevance to countries *similar* to China — it is far from universal. It had clear relevance for Vietnam, for India and Naxalbari, for Peru, and for Nepal — which are countries that share some of the extreme backwardness of 1930s China.

Creation of an Exaggerated Universality

A footnote was added to the essay above that negates some Mao's argument on particularity:

“... the imperialist system all over the world was profoundly shaken because the Soviet Union had become strong, because all the imperialist powers, except the United States, had either been overthrown or weakened in the war, and finally because the imperialist front was breached in China by the victorious Chinese revolution. Thus, much as in China, it has become possible for the peoples of all, or at least some, of the colonial countries in the East to maintain big and small revolutionary base areas and revolutionary regimes over a long period of time, and to carry on long-term revolutionary wars in which to surround the cities from the countryside, and then gradually to advance to take the cities and win nation-wide victory. The view held by Comrade Mao Tse-tung in 1928 on the question of establishing independent regimes in colonies under direct imperialist rule has changed as a result of the changes in the situation.”

It was true, in fact, that base areas functioned in the Philippines, Vietnam and elsewhere in the wake of WW2.

But by the 1960s, during the high tide of anti-colonial struggle (when the third world became a “storm center” of revolution) the assumed universality of PPW was further expanded (especially in the period of Lin Biao's influence) — and it was not longer just assumed to be universal “in the East.”

Meanwhile, Mao Zedong himself was telling delegations to not imitate, to think creatively, to not take what his own Chinese party was saying as a gospel, etc.

Later, Gonzalo, the leader of Peru's Shining Path, even [implied in 1988](#) that PPW was a model applicable to *advanced* capitalist countries with little feudal agriculture, integrated national markets and very strong central states.

To put it a bit crudely, some Maoists did for Protracted Peoples War what Regis Debray did for the Cuban revolution — turn an extremely important revolutionary experience into a dubious universal model.

The assumption of “two roads” was embedded in the [documents of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement](#) (RIM) which gathered some Maoist groups into a trend during the 1980s and 90s. It was assumed that there were “two types of countries” (imperialist and semicolonial-semifeudal), and that for each there was a universally applicable road for the

revolutionary military strategy (October road of armed insurrection and the road of Protracted Peoples War).

When I wrote the Che article (twelve years ago for the RCP) this assumption of two types of countries was assumed. And the critique of Che was that he promoted the wrong universal model. And, like TNL, I think that approach in that article is wrong. It embodies a mechanical, dogmatic, non-materialist (and rather non-Maoist) under-appreciation of the particularity of contradiction.

Not Your Granddaddy's Peoples War

The conditions in Latin America (and frankly much of the world) are distinct and particular enough that there are not just “two roads” or “two types of countries” — it was never that simple, and it is much less true today. Certainly your granddaddy's peoples war does not apply *generally* in the third world now — and didn't in the 1960s either. (Even in places like India and Nepal, where the Chinese experience has direct relevance, this requires creative contemporary adaptation.)

TNL writes:

“The tragic fate of foquista projects in Latin America reveal the limits of that strategy, but it is a mistake to confuse the falsification of one theory with the verification of another, in this case the theory of the universal applicability of PPW in the Third World.”

I agree with this.

I think that the experience in Peru (despite flaws and criticisms) does confirm that PPW had considerable ongoing strategic applicability, and I suspect that there are other places in Latin America (Colombia etc.) where this may also be true. But the small size of many countries and islands, the strength of central governments, the decline of feudal relations, the growth of megacities, and the real differences of political history all suggest that applicability has real limits.

We Need to Greatly Deepen Our Sense of Mass Line

However, I think it is much more valuable to critique Guevarism in terms of its incorrect view of the involvement, organization and consciousness of the people. Like many forms of radical thinking, Guevarism hoped to shock and galvanize popular uprisings (in a telescoped way) — with the intention of jumping into the lead of that. They hoped to flip organized forces over onto their focoist plate by being an armed and exemplary vanguard — in the ways that the urban networks and older socialist movements fell in behind Castro in Cuba.

And, in contrast to that, there is a Maoist critique that says there need to be a much deeper and organized mobilization of the people themselves in their own liberation — in order to form the FOUNDATION upon which the ONGOING revolutionary process can be built. There needs to be an organized core, deeply linked to organized people, waging a revolutionary war (i.e. as a peoples war) — because without that, the people themselves have not become “fit to rule” and

don't have the instruments, experience and consciousness to actually push through the revolutionary process. In that there was a special entwined role for agrarian revolution ("Land to the tiller") and village militias-at-the-base — both of which are much less prominent in Guevarist strategies.

There is not enough appreciation (today, among revolutionaries) of the value of "protracted" within PPW. But in some ways it was the drawn-out character of the Chinese revolution that ALLOWED the revolutionaries to create a parallel state BEFORE they seized power (with trained cadre, tested revolutionary policies, a strong solid organized core and leadership, developed alliances over time etc.) There is an advantage in having a "shadow cabinet" and having couple decades to actually *test* revolutionary policies (of agrarian revolution, of governmental structure, new forms of production, even art and education). In China, it was the years of *protracted* revolution that gave rise to the "Yenan Way" (a whole systematic way of operating) — and that rested the core of what became "Mao Zedong Thought."

In other words, there was a relationship between "protracted" and "peoples war" — and the protracted nature of the revolution in China created opportunities for deepening its character as a *peoples* war. And (conversely) there are serious problems that have emerged in revolutionary movements where the seizure of power has been more explosively "telescoped" and (frankly) where it has had more elements of a sudden coup d'etat, insurrection or coup de main.

Both the Cuban and Russian revolutions were more telescoped in that way. In Cuba they had trouble forming a governing party and base that was prepared for a continuing revolution. In Russia they had trouble developing a truly revolutionary army and sinking deep roots in the rural areas. And in those cases the "telescoped" victory played a huge role in *limiting* what was possible later.

Understanding this helps underscore what is correct in the Maoist critique of Guevarism — its underestimation of the conscious role of the people, the need for a highly organized revolutionary core with deep political ties among the people.

And a problem with Guevarism (and the experience in Cuba itself) is that while the revolutionary projects were armed and radical — in a number of strategic ways, they did not rely on (and hence empower) the broader ranks of the people. Their plans were more like strikes at power (armed coups) with three conditions: weak tottering governments, widespread discontent, and small charismatic rural groups of armed "heroic guerrillas."

Guevarism sought guerrilla zones that acted as catalysts for national crisis. Maoism sought political base areas that would function as a parallel state contending for countrywide power.