

A. G. FRANK

## CLASS, POLITICS, AND DEBRAY

No honest and constructive criticism of Régis Debray's work can fail to pay due tribute to its importance and its merits. As a revolutionary document in the best tradition of political writing, Debray's series of essays squarely faces and has obliged all of us to deal with those most important political problems of our times that many have sought to evade. Debray has convincingly criticized pseudo-revolutionary tendencies and has affirmed an honest call to revolutionary arms. Furthermore, his personal conduct has been consistent with his appeal, which is more than most of us can say for ourselves. But all this, as he would doubtless be the first to agree, does not place Debray's work above criticism. If anything, it renders a critique of Debray's writings, where objectively warranted, all the more important.

Debray's theses, in our estimation, call for a critique on two fundamental grounds: first, they do not derive from a fundamental *analysis* of Latin American society, and still less of its *class* structure; and second, in consequence, they divorce *theory* from practice and, mistaking the nature of the Latin American revolution, they underestimate the *political* role of military activity and mass participation, and their interrelationships. The lack of analysis of society would not be serious in a political tract (as distinct from an analytic work) if it did not result in the perpetuation in a different form of the very political weakness of revolutionary policy in Latin America that Debray himself wants to overcome. In making these criticisms, we direct them at the well known central theses of Debray rather than at "quotable" isolated affirmations in his writings, which often contradict his own central theses.

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(1) Debray's writings are, and should be appreciated as, political tracts and not political analyses of Latin American society. No economic and social analysis of Latin America is to be found in Debray's three essays, not even in "Problems of Revolutionary Strategy in Latin America,"<sup>1</sup> which may be said to be the most analytic of them. Specifically, there is no analysis of the productive or the class structure of Latin America or any of its parts. Accordingly, Debray also makes no political analysis of Latin American society—as distinct from, and as a basis for, the analysis of Latin American political movements that he does make. Nor does Debray make any provision for such economic-social-political analysis anywhere in his political program for the Latin American revolution.

This lack of analysis—and failure to rely on analysis—of the social milieu and dynamic in which the Latin American revolutionary must work certainly distinguishes Debray, and the Cuban Revolution as well, from the Soviet, Chinese, and Vietnamese revolutions, in which not only Lenin, Mao Tse-tung, and Ho Chi Minh, but many other leaders distinguished themselves by the social analysis on which revolutionary theory and practice were both based. The leadership of these revolutions studied and understood the societies in which their successful political work was done. And, according to Debray's account at his "trial" in Bolivia, Che was himself writing a political economy of Latin America with one hand while fighting in Bolivia with the other.

Analysis, as contrasted to an empirical trial-and-error approach, does not mean importing the "national bourgeoisie vs. feudalism" schema from Moscow, or the "four group United Front" program from Peking, or the "uneven and combined development permanent revolution" formula of Trotsky. In Latin America it is necessary to analyze how the class structure was formed and is still being transformed through the colonial and neo-colonial structure that world capitalist development has imposed on all parts of the continent. This requires reliance on the Marxist *method* to study the reality, and the varieties of reality, in Latin America; and it does not permit the simple application of labels or schemas, used even by Debray, such as "feudal oligarchy."

(2) Debray divorces, or fails to marry, revolutionary theory and

revolutionary practice. In denying the validity of, and therewith refusing to answer, the question whether the Latin American revolution is bourgeois or socialist, Debray confuses the political nature of the revolution. This mistake is, we suggest, a direct consequence of his failure to make the necessary analysis of Latin American socioeconomic reality—however much, as has been claimed by many, Debray may or may not short-sell the relevance of European and Asian teachings. Furthermore, Debray's theory of the Cuban Revolution itself departs in important respects from Cuban revolutionary practice. For instance, the whole 26th of July Movement beyond the Sierra Maestra and its political significance for revolutionary practice and theory find no counterpart in Debray's model. The observation that this movement was of little use in supplying Fidel with weapons is not enough to dispose of its political significance and is only one of many symptoms of Debray's underestimation of the politics of revolution, Cuban or otherwise. Again, the Cuban Revolution's success was not just achieved in the Sierra Maestra before January 1, 1959, as Debray implies, but also in its development throughout Cuba after that date, as Debray would probably agree. For, as Fidel noted in his speech of April 8, 1968,

in all fairness, we cannot say that the first of January [1959] was the triumph of the Revolution. Traditionally we have identified the Revolution only with armed struggle, but really on the first of January the rebellion triumphed. . . . In those early times, could we say, in truth, that we knew what a revolution was? In those times we had a feeling, which was the feeling of the struggle, the feeling of rebellion. . . .

Thus, just as July 26, 1953, or December 2, 1956, need not have led to guerrilla warfare (after all, they were not intended to, and other planned or executed uprisings did not do so elsewhere), so the fighting in the Sierra Maestra need not necessarily have led to the socialist revolution. Had the Cuban Revolution been unable to go beyond 1959, it would of course have been derailed and defeated altogether. Fortunately, the Cuban Revolution's momentum and direction (derived in part from political mobilization beyond the Sierra Maestra) were able to get it over the bourgeois

hump. Not all revolutionary movements, even guerrilla-led ones, have succeeded. Most of them, and notably the Algerian, failed; and from Prestes in Brazil to Machado in Venezuela armed struggle has not provided a political guarantee against reformism. By contrast, their political direction of military action has permitted the Chinese and Vietnamese to avoid derailment of the revolution. Furthermore, it must be noted that the Cuban class structure, the Cuban bourgeoisie's decision—and ability to decide—to throw in the towel and move to Miami, and the international correlation of forces made the hump to be overcome in Cuba significantly lower than it is in the rest of Latin America today. Thus, Debray's account is not quite accurate; and, especially if the Cuban Revolution is to be regarded as a vanguard and integral part of the Latin American revolution, his model cannot be a sure-fire guide.

If Debray had wedded a program for revolutionary action to an analysis of Latin American society, or perhaps even of Cuban society, instead of deriving it mainly from an analysis (adequate or not) of the Cuban and Latin American revolutionary movements, he could never have been led to counsel revolutionary practice without—or rather with—false revolutionary theory. Specifically, an analysis of the class and neocolonial structure of Latin America would lead Debray to see that the current development of socialist revolutionary theory in Latin America is certainly a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition for successful revolutionary practice. Specifically, correct revolutionary theory is necessary to insure that at the first obstacle supposedly revolutionary practice is not derailed into a *frente amplia* (broad front) such as that now joined by Prestes in Brazil, a *paz democrática* (democratic peace) such as that now advocated by Machado in Venezuela, or a NASAKOM (nationalism, Islam, and Communism) as practised in Indonesia under Sukarno—and to suffer their inevitable consequences.

An analysis of the Latin American class structure would reveal who is the enemy to be fought (the bourgeoisie as well as imperialism), what political weapons he has at his disposal (reformism and temptation), whom the revolution can count on, how it must politically mobilize these people—in a word, what the theory and practice of the Latin American revolution must be. It is not for nothing that in his call for "Two, Three, Many Vietnams" Che

said that it "shall be in Our America, almost certainly, a Socialist Revolution."

Debray's failure to analyze Latin American society and to link revolutionary theory and practice adequately leads him to underestimate the importance of political mass participation in the revolution and to omit the political role of military activity in organizing this mass participation. Debray appeals for a guerrilla push to get the revolution started, and he hopes that by putting its leadership into rural guerrilla rather than urban party or even *kaf-feeeklatsch* hands, the revolution will proceed to victory through the formation of a people's army. But nowhere does Debray suggest how the guerrilla band is later to develop into the people's army and the popular political movement the revolution requires. Far from suggesting how the guerrilla *foco* might create the political, or even military, conditions for this further development, Debray's critique of self-defense and guerrilla political work in rural areas and his disregard of guerrilla ties to a "26th of July"-type movement in Cuba as well as elsewhere in Latin America would seem to argue against the organization of a wider political movement. Yet Fidel told the OLAS conference that the need for a guerrilla nucleus of the revolutionary movement "does not mean that the guerrilla movement can rise without any previous work; it does not mean that the guerrilla movement is something that can exist without political direction. No! We do not deny the role of political organizations. The guerrilla is organized by a political movement, by a political organization."

Thus, military actions require adequate political direction and support, lest like a house built on weak foundations the first storm destroy both foundation and superstructure. Clear class analysis is essential for carefully (tactically) selected and politically (strategically) guided armed actions to be militarily successful against the enemy, and politically successful in mobilizing the people as friends of the revolution. Not only is a *popular* base area necessary to assure the supply, communication, and propaganda requirements of military activity; but the latter must—and is essential to—assure further political mobilization and participation of the people. Thus, successful military action and correct political mobilization require adequate class analysis of Latin American society.

Such political analysis unquestionably also points to the necessity of rural guerrilla warfare, but it would eliminate some of the contradictions and enhance the political strategy of Debray's program for the Latin American revolution.

#### NOTE

1. *New Left Review*, September–October, 1967.