

GUERILLAS IN LATIN AMERICA

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AMONG the questions which both Basil Davidson's *Liberation of Guiné* and Victor Kiernan's article on peasant revolution raise, is the vexed one of Latin American guerilla warfare in the 1960s and the theories associated with the names of Rkgis Dkbray and Che Guevara. The subject is obscure and confused, and a few notes on it may be useful. They are formulated in a rather apodictic manner for the sake of brevity. One might call them: Twelve common errors about guerilla warfare in Latin—or more exactly South America, for I know too little about the central American scene to discuss it profitably.

1. *That the Latin American peasantry is "passive"*

There is quite a lot of evidence to the contrary, though this does not imply that the poor agricultural population is or was uniformly and everywhere equally activist. Geographically, there is a tradition of endemic peasant rebellion in certain Mexican areas and in a large part of the region of dense Indian settlement in the Andes, notably Peru. Apart from exceptional episodes like the rising of Tupac Amaru in the late eighteenth century, most of these rebellions and insurrections are virtually unknown, but this reflects on the historiography of the Andean lands and not on their peasants. The most recent example of generalized (but decentralized) peasant activism in Peru in the early 1960s. However, it is probably true that certain types of peasantry are unusually prone to rebellion—e.g. (as Eric Wolf rightly holds) the traditionalist "middle peasant", neither sufficiently involved in the new capitalist market economy as a kulak, nor too poor, weak, oppressed and socially disorganized. Permanent landless wage or plantation labourers are the basis for rural trade unions rather than peasant rebellion. Traditional communal organizations threatened from outside tend to be potentially rather activist. **So** do individual frontier colonists and squatters. Mobile, active, and above all armed and combative cattlemen, bandit-types etc. are of course far from passive, though ideologically rather indeterminate. All these cases are to be found in Latin America in large numbers.

2. *That the guerilla movement of Fidel Castro was an exceptional phenomenon*

It was exceptional insofar as (a) it succeeded and (b) inaugurated

a social revolution. But *qua* guerilla movement it was one of a long line of such movements in Latin American history and, quantitatively, one of the more modest. Even if we leave aside the wild horsemen who have frequently infused local wars and revolutions with a demotic component, and social banditry (the footslogging *cangaçeiros* of east Brazil were classified as a peasant guerilla by the Communist International), there are still plenty of such movements. Many of them are obscure and forgotten, others have impinged directly on modern revolutionary or world politics, e.g. the systematic guerilla warfare of the Mexicans in the 1860s, which defeated the French, the Zapatistas of the Mexican Revolution, the Prestes Column in Brazil in the middle 1920s. Except for a West German scholar, no one, so far as I know, has so far attempted or is attempting to analyse this long and powerful experience of popular guerilla struggle systematically.¹ Guerilla war did not begin in the Sierra Maestra.

3. *That Fidel Castro's guerilla movement is a general model for Latin American revolution in general or guerilla warfare in particular*

Its success was and remains an inspiration for revolutionaries, but its conditions were peculiar and not readily repeatable, (a) because Cuba is in many respects unlike most other parts of Latin America, (b) because the internal and international situation which, in the late 1950s, permitted a very heroic and intelligent, but rather small and ill-prepared, guerilla force to overthrow the Batista régime is not likely to be duplicated, more especially because (c), chiefly as a consequence of Fidel's victory, the forces which are now mobilized against Latin American guerillas are immeasurably more effective, determined and backed by the USA than was believed necessary before 1959.

4. *That the 1960s saw a major outburst of guerilla warfare in Latin America*

In 1960 there was, leaving aside some possibly surviving Peronist guerillas in Argentina and the special case of the armed peasants' and miners' militias in Bolivia, one major example of armed action by rural revolutionaries: the mainly CP-led "zones of armed self-defence" in various parts of Colombia, often misnamed "independent republics". The 1960s saw the development of two other movements, a significant, but rather marginal one in Venezuela, which never looked like being a politically decisive force, and a much more formidable one in Guatemala, which would almost certainly have won, if the certainty of all-out US hostility had not prevented the sort of general jumping-off-the-fence which so helped Fidel Castro. These three movements are still in existence. The Colombian one (now joined by a "Fidelist" force the ELN and a Maoist one, the ELP) now operates a more

classical guerilla. The Venezuelan, abandoned first by the local CP, more recently (to judge by its leader Douglas Bravo's complaints in January 1970)² also by the Cubans, is now very much more restricted. The Guatemalan one is in existence, but its prospects are obscure."

Broadly speaking, the situation today is comparable to what it was in 1960. Various other attempts to set up guerilla operations, as in Peru and Bolivia, not to mention a few other areas, never really got off the ground.

5. That this relative failure indicates a lack of revolutionary potential in Latin America

This view is becoming more popular as the result of the evident failure of the Cuban revolution to be successfully followed up elsewhere. There is little warrant for it. Apart from the cases already mentioned under (4) above, the 1960s saw, among others, the largest peasant mobilization of probably the past 150 years in Peru (1960-63), a classical and entirely successful urban popular insurrection in Santo Domingo, stopped only by massive direct US intervention, an extremely interesting, though in the end unsuccessful populist-left process of radicalization in Brazil (1960-64), stopped by a military coup, urban insurrections in Argentina (1969) and a good many other phenomena not usually associated with social and political stability. What is at issue is not the existence of revolutionary social forces on this continent, but the exact form in which they find practical expression, their means of success or that of the alternative policies designed to dissipate them or to satisfy the needs which give rise to them.

6. That the failure of the guerilla attempts indicates the impracticability of such operations in Latin America today

The survival in Colombia of effective armed peasant action over a period of (by now) anything up to twenty years, demonstrates that this is not so. The truth is that the politically motivated dismissal of the (CP-led) Colombian guerillas by Régis Débray (who now admits in his reply to Sweezy and Hubermann that he had no first-hand acquaintance with them),³ has created an unduly gloomy impression of guerilla chances. Conversely, several of the guerilla attempts which fitted better into the Débray thesis—notably the Peruvian ones of 1965 and Che Guevara's own Bolivian adventure—were doomed before they started by sheer amateurism—e.g., ignorance of local Indian languages or local conditions, by strategic and tactical obsolescence—e.g.

* For reasons of brevity and convenience I have neglected various political divisions in these movements, and used such terms as "Fidelist" and "Maoist" in the colloquial sense, rather than enter into the acrimonious sectarian disputes about their meaning.

the failure to be aware of the new possibilities and forces of "counter-insurgency"^M--by a noble but ill-advised impatience but above all by fundamental political error. They assumed that because several of the objective conditions for revolution were present, therefore pure voluntarism, the decision of a few outsiders to start it, would be decisive. Consequently small, in some cases numerically quite insufficient, groups remained isolated and fell relatively easy victims to their enemies: when a guerilla lacks the social and political "fish-in-the-water" basis which makes it into a guerilla, it is after all no more than an ill-equipped, under-strength, and probably undertrained Ranger unit without reserves and reinforcements. It can still succeed in very exceptional cases, but probably only if conditions over which it has no control at all are unusually favourable. But the *foco* theory of guerilla war assumed (a) that these conditions could be influenced to a greater extent than is probable and (b) that a remote chance is reasonable odds. It is not. The Sierra Maestra does not justify the numerous other attempts to duplicate it, any more than Garibaldi's invasion of Sicily in 1860, which was successful, legitimized the various, uniformly unsuccessful and demoralizing, attempts at similar adventures organized by Mazzini in the 1850s. And the critique made by loyal Mazzinians in 1858 is equally applicable to Débray and Guevara :

"In our opinion it is seriously wrong :

To impose action by a few on the inert and unprepared will of the many, whenever it suits you;

To believe that a rebellion, which is easy to organize, can be rapidly turned into a large-scale insurrection;

To import insurrection from without, before it has been properly prepared from within;

To make immediate plans only for getting into action, while leaving the success of the action to look after itself."⁴

7. That "armed self-defence" is incompatible with guerilla war

"Armed self-defence" is a tactic peculiar to situations of endemic civil war (as in Colombia after 1948), to post-revolutionary situations (as in Bolivia after 1952), and to regions where state power is intermittent or remote, and has no monopoly of arms, as in many South American frontier regions. It consists in effect in the setting up of armed militias, normally combined with a fair degree of local autonomy, by communities or political movements in particular areas, almost always to defend themselves against incursions from outside, but possibly also to intervene in national affairs. The critique of this tactic, which is made most strongly in Débray's *Revolution in the Revolution* holds that it was used for purely defensive purposes, which is correct, and that it was militarily ineffective, which is mistaken. The

"annihilation campaign" which the Colombian army waged in 1964–5 against the main "armed self-defence" zones—we now have a splendid account of it from the guerillas' side⁶—transformed it into ordinary guerilla warfare, but did not eliminate it. At the present moment (or at least at the end of 1969) armed guerilla units under the same leadership were active in the same regions, including the very area in which the "armed self-defence" units of Marquetalia had first awaited contact with government troops in 1964.6

The critique of its (originally) purely defensive character confuses several things. It may be defensive (a) because the movements organizing it are uninterested in revolution, as many leftists thought the orthodox CPs were; or (b) because the general situation in the country is not revolutionary, as the orthodox CPs themselves claimed; or (c) because the peasants, unless and until attacked, are unwilling to launch themselves into guerilla warfare or insurrection, or do not understand the need for it. The characteristic "armed self-defence" area is one where the peasant (or as in Bolivia, the miners') movement has already achieved substantial local successes without civil war, which it is concerned to safeguard. The political problem is therefore real, and all who have actually organized such successful (local or regional) peasant movements, whether orthodox CP as in Colombia, or Trotskyist, as Hugo Blanco in La Convención (Peru) agree that in such circumstances defensive armed organization—which may pass into guerilla warfare in response to outside attack—is the most practicable next step. Without it guerilla war lacks an adequate basis. In Peru, Luis de la Puente discovered this to his cost when he chose "purely mechanically" to quote Hector Béjar,⁷ to establish his main guerilla base in La Convención and was left to fight and die in isolation.

The major and legitimate critique of "armed self-defence" is that any grass-roots peasant movement tends to have purely local perspectives, and must therefore be subordinated to a national strategy and embodied in a national guerilla force with wider horizons. A revolutionary guerilla must be more than the sum of its local components. But if it cannot rest content with building on the few ready-made local bases of armed action, it cannot sweep them aside either. What the masses are prepared to understand and do is a crucial consideration for any serious revolutionary; and especially what they are prepared to do in the places where they are already armed, self-confident, and ready for action, and from which almost certainly a substantial proportion of the later fighters and leaders of the national guerilla will be drawn.

8. *That modern "counter-insurgency" and US intervention have made effective guerilla war impossible in Latin America*

Except for the Dominican Republic there has so far been no direct intervention by the US armed forces in the 1960s, though a good deal of direct and indirect support (finance, equipment, training, "advisors" etc.) for the local Latin American state, or more rarely freelance, forces which have conducted the anti-guerilla struggles. What would happen if the US intervened is therefore a hypothetical question, though Vietnam provides at least one possible answer. We must therefore leave it aside.

On the other hand modern "counter-insurgency" techniques have been tried with considerable effect. They have made the task of guerillas much more difficult even in the most favourable political conditions, through innovations of both technological and strategic-tactical character. The helicopter is an obvious example of the first. The strategy of systematic encirclement and the separation of guerillas from their supply and political base (e.g. by the forced removal of the peasants to concentration camps, "strategic hamlets" etc.) is an obvious example of the second. By such means the major advantages of the guerillas—mobility, invisibility, the merging into the local population etc.—have been to a great extent offset. The object of effective counter-insurgency has thus been to isolate the guerillas within a surrounded, preferably empty, space and then to reverse the traditional procedure by systematically tracking and harrying them with specially trained and equipped counter-guerillas (Rangers etc.) until their units are broken up or cornered, when modern technology can bring up overwhelming reinforcements immediately against them.

It is evident that some of the guerillas of the 1960s played directly into the hands of such a strategy, e.g. in Peru, where De La Puente not merely concentrated all his men and supplies on a remote and supposedly impregnable mountain massif, but actually advertised his intention to use it as his permanent base. It is also probable that the *foco* theory of guerilla war, which envisages guerilla units which are almost by definition a group of imported foreigners without a firm initial base among the local peasantry, suits counter-insurgency very well. It is also certain that even the best-prepared Latin American guerillas were initially surprised by the new techniques and made serious mistakes—as the Colombian ones admit.

Nevertheless, the Colombian ones have succeeded in maintaining their activity, in spite of their initial errors, in spite of the severe handicap of having to arrange for the evacuation, dispersion and resettlement of a civilian population, in spite of the strength and long anti-irregular experience of the Colombian army, and in spite of the deep political divisions in the countryside, which, after one and a half

decades of civil war, provided far more potential local allies for the army than the solid anti-white Indian masses of the Peruvian Andes. They have succeeded not merely by tactical and technical adjustments, but above all by a profound understanding of the political base of guerilla war.

Counter-insurgency makes this more rather than less crucial. To take two obvious points. By making the actual life of the guerilla physically far more taxing, it puts a premium on the ability to recruit *peasants* who can stand it more easily than imported intellectuals or even urban workers. All Latin American guerillas which have maintained themselves, have been predominantly composed of peasants—the Colombian FARC (i.e. CP) almost entirely, a Colombian ELN unit about which we have information to over 90 per cent, Bravo's FALN units in Venezuela to 75 per cent.⁸ Again, the extreme hazards to which the general peasant population is now exposed, make it more crucial than ever to maintain links with them and, so far as possible, to protect them. Débray's view that "in its action and military organization (the guerilla) is independent of the civilian population, and therefore it is not called upon to undertake the direct defence of the peasant population"⁹ is a recipe for suicide. It contrasts sharply with the Colombian experience and practice, which insists not only on the fundamental importance of maintaining a civilian organization, but on the most elaborate methods for safeguarding peasant supporters. This applies both to intelligence and operations. Thus it is (by Colombian experience) crucial to identify and screen all "outsiders" in a region, especially those recently arrived—e.g. muleteers, traders and hawkers, small shopkeepers, travelling salesmen, healers and dentists, schoolteachers and other public officials, beggars, prostitutes or other "foreign" women etc. It is essential to have an apparatus of counter-propaganda to offset the promises of the counter-insurgent army or even the immediate tactics of friendship (free rides for children on helicopters and the like). It is essential to "educate the people in a party spirit" in order to avoid irresponsible or accidental behaviour which might aid the enemy. Even known supporters must never be exposed as such, i.e. they must always be instructed to give the army the *right* information about which way the guerillas went, show them the *correct* amount of money they paid for supplies.

The test is in practice. Both the Bolivian and the Peruvian guerillas were liquidated in a matter of months, with little difficulty. The 1964–5 campaign against Marquetalia (Colombia), conducted by 16,000 troops, lasted 533 days, and led to the setting up of a national guerilla force (the FARC) which remains active, as we have seen, in the same regions in which the peasant militias were established before 1964.

9. *That Latinamerican revolution depends essentially on rural guerillas*

A rather simple-minded form of Maoism assumes that the countries concerned are overwhelmingly composed of countrymen. In Latin America this is now true only of a few small republics, and the rate of urbanization will soon make even the last major peasant countries—e.g. Brazil—predominantly urban. It is therefore clear that a strategy based on the village surrounding and then capturing the town is unrealistic. Serious guerillas such as Douglas Bravo in Venezuela, have no doubt that revolution to be successful must combine rural guerilla and urban insurrection, not to mention dissident sections of the armed forces.¹⁰ Rural guerillas have the advantage of operating in a social and sometimes geographical milieu which favours them, but the disadvantage that they may operate among what are minority groups of the population and—perhaps more seriously—in areas remote from the places where the actual decisions about the political future of the state are taken (e.g. in the capital and other great cities), or even in areas remote from the centre of gravity of the economy. No revolutionaries who fail to develop a programme or a perspective for capturing the capital cities are to be taken very seriously, especially in Latin America, where régimes have been used to losing political, or even military, control of outlying provinces for quite long periods without being seriously affected. Indeed, it is probable that but for US hysteria about Fidel, the Colombian government would have been in no hurry to “annihilate” the “armed self-defence” zones, which posed no major political problem at the time.

10. *That urban guerillas can replace either rural guerillas or urban insurrection*

Urban guerilla actions, or what can be plausibly called by such a name, have been in some ways as widely used in the 1960s as rural guerillas, e.g. in Venezuela, Guatemala, Brazil and Uruguay. For reasons adequately discussed in Guevara's book on guerilla war, they are not comparable to rural guerillas in military or political potential,¹¹ and must be regarded as essentially preparatory or ancillary methods of revolutionary struggle. Nobody seriously argues otherwise. In Brazil they are regarded by their champions as a preliminary to the establishment of rural guerillas, though also as a valuable agitational and propagandist medium. In Uruguay the Tupamaros, most formidable of urban guerillas on this continent, appear to see their function as one of sharpening the atmosphere of social and political tension rather than as the actual transfer of power, but it is difficult to judge. (In this country the population is overwhelmingly urban). The urban equivalent of rural guerilla war is the insurrection, a potentially decisive weapon (at least in the capital) but one with, as it were, a single shot

at a time and an unconscionably and unpredictably long period of reloading. In the provinces it is less decisive, as demonstrated in the summer of 1969 in Argentina, where the failure of Buenos Aires to follow Cordoba, Rosario etc. saved the régime. In the 1960s there has been one successful urban insurrection (Santo Domingo 1965), which was spontaneous, like most successful movements of this sort which do not take place when the question of state power has already been virtually decided, and one major unsuccessful organised attempt, in Venezuela in the early 1960s, in conjunction with both urban and rural guerillas. It is improbable that at present many Latinamericans will underrate urban guerilla action (or indeed the urban sector), but it is useful to distinguish between such actions which have a direct political purpose and those which arise from operational necessity, e.g. the very fashionable "expropriations" of banks etc. which supply urban guerillas with the means of maintaining themselves. Though good for the morale of the guerillas, they may not necessarily gain public support. It is also wise to remember a crucial political characteristic of such urban action in non-insurrectionary periods. While the rural guerilla rests on the *connivance* of sections of the rural population, the urban guerilla relies on the anonymity of the big city, i.e. the possibility of acting *without* the connivance of the people.

11. *That there is any single recipe for Latinamerican revolution*

Reacting perhaps against the alleged passivity of local Communist Parties, and certainly against mechanically applied international slogans about the "peaceful road to socialism", many of the Latinamerican left adopted the opposite view that *only* armed insurrection in the form of guerilla war was called for. This view, which neglected all the complexities of the situation, was never in fact fully applied in practice, except in ideological polemics. (The use of armed action is of course accepted by everyone on a continent where even ordinary government changes have commonly been achieved by arms. Few of even the most orthodox and moderate CPs have excluded it: some, as in Venezuela, Guatemala or Colombia have temporarily or permanently maintained guerilla forces). As an example, the Venezuelan left never overlooked the possibility of active support from dissident elements in the armed forces, and even the notably unrealistic Peruvian left was sometimes wise enough not to antagonize the army *a priori* by attacking, e.g. barracks.

Revolution in Latin America is likely to be a combined operation, either in a situation of internal political crisis within the established régime, or, more rarely, of such permanent institutional instability that such a crisis can be precipitated. It is likely to combine social forces—peasants, workers, the marginal urban poor, students, sectors

of the middle strata—institutional and political forces, e.g. dissidents in the armed forces and the church, geographical forces, e.g. regional interests in what are normally very divided and heterogeneous republics, etc. Unfortunately the most effective cement of such combinations, the struggle against the foreigner, or more especially the foreign ruler, is rarely applicable except in the small central American states, where the USA is in the habit of intervening directly—but with potentially overwhelming forces—and perhaps, alas, by local nationalisms directed against Latinamerican neighbours. Latin America has been economically colonial, but its republics have been politically sovereign states for a very long time.

Unfortunately also the marxist left, never a major political force outside a relatively few countries, is probably today too weak and divided in most republics to provide either an effective national framework of action or a politically decisive force of leadership. Indeed the net effect of the 1960s has been, for a variety of reasons, to weaken and fragment it more than ever, and to make its unification or even common action extremely difficult. This does not exclude major social changes, even revolutionary ones, but makes it likely that the lead in these will be taken, at least initially, by other forces.

12. That revolutionary movements can operate without political organizations.

Régimes can be overthrown without organization under certain circumstances. Lenin predicted that Tsarism would fall under the impact of some spontaneous movement, and it did, though he did not therefore conclude that the party had no role to play. When a prolonged struggle is envisaged (as in the classical theory of revolutionary guerillas) organization is more crucial than ever and political analysis is indispensable. This applies at all levels. Marulanda, writing as a Colombian peasant guerilla commander, has no doubts that organization, discussion and education are essential for the morale of the guerilleros, if only to keep them occupied between actions. ("That's why in camp we must have a political instructor at all costs. There has to be political training, military training, cleaning of arms and general tidying up.")¹² Hugo Blanco, the Peruvian peasant leader, discovered that the major obstacle to transforming an impressive peasant union movement into "armed self-defence" was his inability to build an adequate organized party structure out of the series of *ad hoc* mass actions and mass rallies.¹³ At the opposite extreme, the rather casual choice of Bolivia as the zone of battle by Guevara—earlier, neighbouring regions of Argentina appear to have been envisaged—and the decision to go ahead without support from any significant Bolivian political force, demonstrate a serious underestimate of the importance of a political

analysis of the conditions of such a struggle. It is possible under certain circumstances to assume that a population forms a single, relatively homogeneous, explosive mass which has merely to be aroused to provide the conditions for revolutionary war. In fact, parts of the Peruvian Indian population did provide such conditions, and flocked to support the guerillas of Lobaton and Béjar in 1965, being subsequently decimated for their pains by the army. The revolutionaries exposed and sacrificed them needlessly, being unable—from numerical weakness, plain ignorance and inexperience as well as lack of political analysis—to take the necessary precautions, or to provide an adequate organization and cadre and leadership which might have formed an effective peasant guerilla, strengthened by the subsequent terror of the armed forces. But if these weaknesses were evident even in the simplest of local political situations, how much more important must they be in much more complex ones which are characteristic of Latin America, a very complex continent?

One brief final observation may be made. Until very recently the analysis of the Latin American guerilla experience of the 1960s was difficult, partly because there was hesitation in many quarters to undertake it in a spirit of realism—at the probable cost of criticizing persons and movements supported and respected by many on the left—partly because adequate material for such an analysis was not available in print. By 1970 both these obstacles to analysis are very much diminished. However, even now any discussion must be very preliminary and subject to future revision.

NOTES

- G. Kahle, Urspruenge u. Entwicklung der mexikanischen Guerilla-tradition (*Jahrb. f. Gesch. von Staat, Wirtschaft u. Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas*, 4/1967, pp. 566-603).
2. *Le Monde*, 15 January, 1970.
3. Régis Débray responde da Camiri (*Monthly Review, edizione, italiana*, 11, 1-2, 1969, p. 1).
4. Quoted in D. Mack Smith, *Il Risorgimento Ztaliano* (Bari, 1968), 426.
5. Jacobo Arenas, *Colombie, Guerillas du Peuple* (Paris, 1969).
6. *El Tiempo* (Bogotá, 13 October, 1969).
7. Hector Béjar, *Les guerillas péruviennes de 1965* (Paris, 1969), 71.
8. *El Tiempo*, loc. cit.; *Avec Douglas Bravo dans les maquis vénézuéliens* (Paris, 1968), 54.
9. R. Débray, *La révolution dans la révolution* (Paris, 1967), 40.
10. *Avec Douglas Bravo*, 49.
11. Che Guevara, *La guerra de guerillas* (Havana, 1960): guerra en terrenos desfavorables.
12. J. Arenas, 118.
13. Hugo Blanco, *El camino de nuestra revolucidn* (Lima, 1964), 63.