

✓ DEBRAY: REVOLUTIONARY OR ELITIST?

BY JAMES PETRAS

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Despite basic weaknesses in Debray's discussion it is necessary to acknowledge a number of valid points he makes. Debray correctly points to the Latin American leftists' lack of military knowledge and their preoccupation with junkets to "international democratic organizations" at the expense of national concerns. Second, he effectively destroys the notion that the revolutionary vanguard in Latin America is necessarily the "Marxist-Leninist Party" (read: pro-Moscow or Maoist groups) and properly calls for a new analysis of revolutionary politics free from the influence of Russian and Chinese dogma and based on Latin American reality. Debray's prescription to the non-Communist revolutionaries (Nationalists, Catholics, Socialists, and Marxists) is that it is a "right and duty to constitute themselves a vanguard independently of these parties" (*Revolution in the Revolution?*, p. 98). Third, Debray presents an accurate (but all too brief) sketch of the ossification and bureaucratization of the Communist parties in Latin America (both pro-Moscow and Maoist) for whom "the political organization has become an end in itself." He correctly points to the negative results of the sterile schisms and sectarian squabbles among "revisionists," "ML'ers," "Trotskyists," etc., which afflict the Latin American revolutionary movement. Debray notes that these divisions do not reflect national problems but the international policies of external powers. His description of how, for a time, the CP manipulated the guerrillas in Colombia, Guatemala, and Venezuela is excellent.

When polemicizing against corrupt, bureaucratic inertia, Debray is a perceptive critic. However, what he offers in its place is less than adequate since he deliberately avoids even a

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rudimentary political analysis of developments in Latin America. (This omission is rationalized on the ground that he is seeking to overcome the destructive "politics" of the pro-Soviet CP's and the Maoists.) Instead, a series of formulas for action is substituted for political analysis, and he defines the problems of revolutionary struggle in "military insurrectionary" terms. Debray writes: "Revolutionary politics, if they are not to be blocked, must be diverted from politics as such." But blocked by whom? To answer this crucial question demands political analysis, because it requires a critical study of the relation of Stalinist politics to revolutionary struggles (from local manipulation to international politics). Indeed, by avoiding serious political analysis, Debray deprives his proposed military activity* of any rational meaning, and there cannot be any coherent explanation of the current political impasse of the guerrilla movement or any light shed on the underlying causes for the reversals suffered by the revolutionary movement in Latin America. Thus, when he attempts to come to grips with guerrilla defeats he ascribes them to individual mistakes, to inexperience, and to their being part of a larger historical perspective—a convenient excuse for avoiding difficult, concrete political analysis.

* Debray has shifted his viewpoint since he wrote *Revolution in the Revolution?* because of his discussion with Che and his experience with the Bolivian Stalinists who apparently played an important role in aiding in the suppression of the guerrilla movement. In an open letter published in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, November 7, 1967, which was written from prison, Debray stated: "In the light of the experience of the Bolivian comrades, and of my final conversations with Che, I would probably modify *Revolution in the Revolution?* on a few important points where I am not in complete agreement with him, as I would emphasize others in which I feel he is completely right (such as the condemnation of the Communist Party, for example, which Che found presented too timorously in my book). But in considering the difficulties encountered by the guerrilla movement in Bolivia, allowance should be made for imponderables such as betrayals of men (unforeseeable) and of party (foreseeable, but not to that extent nor with such deceit) and for the very conception of the revolutionary struggle uncompromisingly applied." See *Evergreen Review*, February 1968, pp. 100-101. Accounts from Bolivia suggest a close working relationship between the Barrientos dictatorship and the pro-Moscow CP—which is the only party among leftist and nationalist parties whose leaders have not been arrested. See "Report from Bolivia Underground," *Militant* (New York), November 24, 1967, p. 4; also an interview with Ralph Schoenman, "Régis Debray, Che Guevara and the Bolivian Guerrilla Struggle," *World Outlook*, November 24, 1967, p. 936.

For Debray, improved military tactics and individual "determination," "awareness," and "certainty" are sufficient to make a successful revolution. His argument, lacking any substance, falls back on tendentious analogies with his "Cuban Case"—largely based on personal communications from Fidel Castro relating to the Sierra Maestra period. Debray's advocacy of guerrillas being "separate" from the mass appears to be an attempt to make a virtue of the isolation of the initial guerrilla movements. Yet, how is it possible to generate "all forms of struggle" by "initiative" and "mobility" of a guerrilla group isolated from a mass base and located in remote focos?

In his sometimes virulent polemic against mass, organized revolutionary politics, Debray focuses on a specific tactic, the use of armed self-defense by Bolivian miners. Here, he grossly oversimplifies a complex situation with the shallow observation that the miners' bad defeat "proves" that the policy of self-defense was wrong. One could similarly argue that the Bolivian guerrillas were wiped out, *ergo*. . . . That, of course, is no way to discuss serious political problems. Debray trivializes major political questions: the defeat of the Bolivian miners is ascribed to an ideology ("Trotskyism"), while defeats of guerrillas are due merely to poor tactics. As a freelance journalist, Debray, unlike a Bolivian revolutionary, does not have to answer to a working-class constituency, and evidently he feels free to offer the miners hollow platitudes and thunderous commands. But what is a mass working class movement to do when it has to protect jobs and union to keep everyone from starving: armed self-defense or wait until guerrillas "take the initiative"? Debray's answer is to criticize those movements having some contact with the masses while holding high his abstract Revolutionary Strategy—so high that it is neither related to popular problems nor relevant to the living social forces which create a base of support for revolutionary struggles.

Also, Debray's dismissal of the economic demands of workers as reformism is nonsense, because economic struggles in Latin America become political precisely because the state is so closely linked with the ruling class.

Accepting the isolation of the guerrillas from the mass, Debray develops the idea that mass support is a function of the development of guerrilla firepower and offensive strength,

rather than viewing the relationship as a dialectical process in which the guerrilla struggle is an outgrowth of mass struggle assisting the mass movement and, in turn, strengthened by it.

In one sense, it appears that Debray has over-reacted to the betrayal of Communist politics: *all* parties, politics, and mass struggles are rejected in favor of guerrillas, elites, and military tactics. But Debray shares more in common with Communists than he would like to think. Both Communist collaboration with the bourgeoisie and Debray's *guerrillerismo* reflect an unwillingness to involve the masses in revolutionary struggles or to build organizations that truly reflect and defend their interests. Debray's gratuitous insults to Bolivian revolutionaries and the Peruvian peasant leader, Hugo Blanco, are reminiscent of Stalinism. His attempt to refute opposing political positions by calling them a "simple provocation" and his effort to link the political lunatics found in the so-called "Posadas group" with genuine Latin American revolutionaries, also have the stale smell of Stalinist-type slander and amalgams.

Despite references by some writers to Debray's "romanticism," he is really an organizational man—at least in his writings. He reduces complex social and political processes to simple organizational formulae. This "theoretician of revolution" brushes aside as too "theoretical," questions dealing with the moving forces of society, their levels of struggle, the issues that are of concern. For Debray, "The nub of the question is not theoretical, it lies in the forms of organization through which the Socialist Revolution will be realized."* Because of this superficial approach Debray completely fails to recognize the important political activity of Blanco in Peru and Yon Sosa in Guatemala: their work in organizing and politicizing masses of previously isolated and exploited peasants. When Debray does attempt to make a particular criticism, he commits the elementary mistake of not checking out his sources. Drawing on a document from the pro-CP FAR in order to attack Guatemalan guerrilla leader Yon Sosa, Debray accuses him of denying the importance of the peasantry in the revolution (Yon Sosa has spent years in peasant organizing), of underestimating

* Apparently consistency is not one of Debray's strong points. Elsewhere he writes "the penalty for a false theory is a military defeat. . . . the butchery of tens and hundreds of comrades and men of the people."

military tactics (Yon Sosa has been fighting arms in hand for seven years), etc. Debray repeats these silly lies which even the FAR (minus its pro-Soviet wing) no longer believes: how else explain FAR cooperation with Yon Sosa today?

Instead of writing polemical diatribes against the tiny Posadas sect which wormed its way into one of the Guatemalan guerrilla units, Debray should have faced a more serious problem: why was the Cuban Revolution unable, after seven years, to inspire an analysis and theory of Latin American development, which failure allowed types like Posadas to provide alternatives to the bankrupt Stalinist dogma of collaboration with the "national bourgeoisie"?

To justify his elitist conceptions Debray attributes the strangle hold of Latin American reformist bureaucrats over mass organizations to the limited consciousness of the masses. Along with impressionistic bourgeois journalists, Debray suggests that cleavages between mass organization leaders and rank and file exist only in a feverish Trotskyist imagination. With this superficial view it becomes easier for Debray to see the struggle in terms of guerrilla units against the state, since the masses are "initially passive" and their "protection depends on a favorable military outcome." Debray does not know that many Latin American reformist leaders develop organizational interests and methods separate and apart from the members and then bureaucratically impose their views on the organization.

Throughout Debray's account there exists a preoccupation with "security" and a distrust of everyone. The working class is "reformist"; trade unions are "economist"; cities are bourgeois; peasants can't be trusted. If all this is so, on what basis does one construct a revolutionary organization? Even on the level of revolutionary techniques and tactics Debray is badly informed. He rejects "armed propaganda" as ineffective, leading to disaster. Yet, Montes, leader of the FAR (a group which Debray continually praises), effectively uses armed propaganda.* Debray's error was to equate "armed propaganda" with speeches and faith, when in fact it involved activities such as expropria-

* See Eduardo Galeano, "With the Guerrillas in Guatemala" in *Ramparts*, September, 1967, pp. 56-59, and an extended version of the same article in James Petras and Maurice Zeitlin, eds., *Latin America: Reform or Revolution?*, New York, 1968.

tion of land, retributive justice to terrorist landlords, etc. The only specific suggestion he offers to win over the peasantry is "combativeness" which leaves little for the guerrillas to fight about. Without a program and specific socio-economic reforms, the struggle between the state and the guerrillas would appear to the peasantry as a squabble between aliens.

There is a certain sophistry in Debray's mode of arguing. In criticizing armed propaganda, he asks "how have the inhabitants rid themselves of their class enemies?" as if recruitment of peasant militants is not part of the process of eliminating class enemies. By asking the same ultimatic question about Debray's proposal for suicidal "direct confrontations with the military" one can evoke the same negative answer: will an attack on a military convoy rid the peasantry of its class enemy?

Debray's mindless military action becomes the panacea for overcoming the complex political work that accompanies armed revolutionary struggle. Fortunately, his prescriptions have been rejected by the Guatemalan guerrillas.

For a book which specifically states that it is based on the "Cuban experience" there is precious little serious study of the social forces which enabled the Cuban Revolution to succeed. Debray's account is a distortion of Cuban revolutionary experience. He divorces military aspects from the political as though the revolution's success was determined merely by Castro leading 200 fighters against 5,000 soldiers. But contrary to this mythical notion, there were organized forces that directed men and material to the mountains and to the streets, in the cities, towns, sugar *centrales*, and universities. The Student Directorate, the July 26th Movement, and militant trade unionists provided massive urban support for that revolutionary struggle.* If Latin American revolutionaries imitated Castro's "military confrontation" with Batista, as Debray advises they should, without the national, urban Cuban political conditions, it would result—and has already resulted—in tragic disasters.

Debray's pragmatism, his narrow vision, and his ill-informed discussion of tactics, without any understanding of the socio-political context, lead him mistakenly to consider military tactics

* For a detailed empirical analysis of the mass working class support of the Cuban Revolution, see Maurice Zeitlin, *Revolutionary Politics and the Cuban Working Class*, Princeton, 1967.

unrelated to specific social conditions existing in each Latin American country.

Debray believes it impermissible to subordinate the guerrillas to a party. His argument is based primarily on the experience of armed struggle in Venezuela, Colombia, and Guatemala. More specifically, he discusses the relation of a guerrilla movement to a party, the Communist Party, which was intent on dismantling the guerrilla operations. The question he does not confront is: what should be the relationship of a guerrilla movement to a non-Communist party committed to revolution (not co-existence), which has an apparatus for conducting an armed struggle? And if such parties do not exist and guerrilla struggle begins, should one make a virtue of this weakness as Debray does? Because he does not recognize the absence of a revolutionary organization as a weakness, and because he equates all parties to the Communist class-collaborationist parties, he feels free to condemn the city which produces parties as a "bourgeois" trap for revolutionaries. What Debray does not realize is that it is a trap for revolutionaries like the Peruvian guerrilla, Hector Bejar, or the Venezuelan, Fabricio Ojeda, because there was no urban revolutionary underground and the Communists at best ignored them and at worst cooperated with the police. It is not the city or the urban party that is at fault, but the ~~unfavorable relationship of social forces and, more~~ specifically, the failure of the existing leftist organizations to develop a revolutionary policy.* Armed with empty abstractions, Debray distorts the important role that the urban populace has played (Cuba 1959, Venezuela 1958, Bolivia 1952, Dominican Republic 1965, etc.) in revolutionary struggles and which it must play in the future.

Shifting from the question of party to that of leadership, we find Debray repeating the same errors. He argues that the abandonment of the guerrillas was due to the urban location of the leadership rather than the policies of that leadership. De-

* The importance of urban support of the guerrillas based on a vanguard party was cited in a thorough and perceptive analysis of the defeat of the Peruvian guerrilla struggle. See Silvestre Conduruna, "Las experiencias de la última etapa de las luchas revolucionarias en el Perú," *Vanguardia Revolucionaria*, No. 5, Lima, 1966.

bray should know better: when the Venezuelan CP recalled its guerrillas, both urban and rural party leaders quit. It was not the bourgeois ambience or psychology of the city that brought the Venezuelan CP leader Petkoff down from the mountains. Debray covers up basic political differences—between social revolutionaries and pro-Russian class collaborationists—with psycho-geographical mystifications. Because of this corrupt relationship between the CP and the guerrillas, Debray opts for self-reliant guerrillas and makes a virtue of the isolation from centers of urban radicalism.

Debray proposes to reduce infiltration by reducing contact with the cities to a minimum. He has already spoken of the untrustworthiness of the peasants, polemicized against armed propaganda, against peasant unions, against self-defense by trade unions and independent republics, against vanguard parties. The question is, aside from Debray, how and whom does one recruit?

In practice, the Bolivian *fracaso* revealed that without trained cadres in the city and country, a substantial group of undisciplined lumpenproletarians were recruited (along with honest revolutionaries) to the guerrilla movement with disastrous results.

Ralph Schoenman's analysis speaks to this point:

As to the guerrilla: the guerrilla seemed to be comparatively cut off from the traditional left formations. And one consequence of this is that in the cities and in the mines there was an absence of struggle which related to what the guerrillas were doing. In the cities very little is known of the Liberation Army.

The absence of an underground paper or leafletting or political activity, psychological warfare in support of the guerrilla, the absence of these things was an important contributory factor to the isolation of the guerrilla.*

In Debray's scheme of things, military operations and tactical knowledge of military operations are given priority over gaining mass support. The result is that isolated, purely military victories do not lead to political gains or to weakening the central state power. Given his mountain mystique, Debray had little or nothing to say to the millions of workers of Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and the Dominican Republic, where the urban populace is much more militant than those in the rural areas.

* *World Outlook*, November 24, 1967, p. 958.

He offers no political strategy or struggle to Venezuela's huge urban slums, Peru's sugar plantations, etc.

Mistrust of the masses and ultra-voluntarism are both found in Debray's demand for an authoritarian dictatorial organization that makes the bureaucratic Communist parties look like paragons of democratic virtue. Debray proposes that "an end be put to . . . congresses . . . assemblies at all levels." Democracy is "paralyzing"; it is the cause of the Debrayan vice called "excessive deliberation" which "hampers executive centralized and vertical methods." (p. 102) What if leaders, who are only too often misinformed, make incorrect decisions? What if lower cadres possess insights that lead to a wiser course? Does democratic or autocratic organization further the revolutionary movement in such cases? Debray does not provide any evidence that a "technically capable executive committee centralized and united, a revolutionary general staff" is better equipped to lead a revolution. He just assumes it, as a matter of principle.

The history of revolutionary movements condemns these elitist precepts to the trash bin. Dynamic revolutionary leadership can only emerge through class struggle and vigorous discussions and cannot resemble the ultra-centralized personality cult espoused by Debray. Debray's type of leader breeds a mood of dependence and intellectual sterility in a movement that usually disappears with the leader.

For Debray, who lacks a coherent theory of revolution, a handful of committed leaders can "set the 'big motor' of the masses"—a slight variation of the discredited old theory of an elite electrifying the masses through bold actions, an approach which has cost Latin American revolutionaries dearly.

By reducing armed struggle to guerrilla struggle, by equating guerrillas with an uprooted and isolated elite, by focusing almost exclusively on the military rather than the political aspects, Debray predetermines the outcome: defeat.