



Re-appropriating Che's image: From the revolution to the market and back again

Antigoni Memou

The story is well known. Alberto Korda Díaz's second snapshot of Ernesto Che Guevara, taken on March the 5th, 1960, at a mass funeral service that Fidel Castro called for the Cubans who were killed during an explosion in Havana, was destined to become probably one of the most reproduced and appropriated pictures of the late twentieth century. The photograph remained in Korda's studio until Che's death in 1967, when an Italian publisher, Gian-Giacomo Feltrinelli, produced posters using two prints of the image given as a gift to him by Korda. The various versions of posters produced by Feltrinelli, by Cuban Niko (Antonio Pérez González) and by the Irish artist Jim Fitzpatrick, almost contemporaneous with the poster boom of the late 1960s and the growing international youth audience interested in the political struggles for justice and freedom, gave to the image its iconic status. These posters were gradually converted into an emblem of revolution, seen as banners carried by demonstrators in the streets of Paris and Mexico and in the anti-war marches around the globe in 1968, often accompanied by the slogans '*¡Hasta la Victoria Siempre!*' and '*¡Unidos Venceremos!*' The revolutionary purity and romanticism of Che's ideas, his anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism and internationalism were personified in the image of the young man with the long hair, the aggressive gaze, the beard and the beret with the star, a source of inspiration for the revolutionary youth in Western capitalist societies.

In the years that followed, the merchandising activity of Che's portrait has been frenetic. The image has been endlessly reproduced from posters and T-shirts central to youth counterculture to advertisements for vodka, jeans and soap powder and represented an outstanding example of state kitsch in Cuba. Artists still appropriate Che's image to make art objects, Hollywood stars such as

Madonna and Cher have been photographed in his recognisable style, Christians in the Media have rendered Christ in a Che style poster for their religious propaganda¹. Within these absolutely different settings, the picture was deprived of its ideological and political context and appeared timeless and ahistorical. Che had acquired an appeal similar to other dead Hollywood stars, like James Dean and Marilyn Monroe. It had almost been forgotten that this man had sacrificed his life in the struggle against capitalism and imperialism, rendering Che's image the most appropriate example for Debord's observation:

the whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that once was directly lived become mere representation. (1994: 12)

More recent and widely debated scholarly work has argued that since the 1960s, consumerism has absorbed the so-called counterculture leaving little, if any, space for resistance against the central ideology of capitalism (Heath and Potter, 2004). Following this line of thought, the image of an anti-capitalist revolutionary becomes just another commodity subject to the same logic of the capitalist market mechanism. Yet, another use of the image, more resilient, resistant and hopeful, that does not conform to this logic, can be retrieved from social and political struggles and radical everyday experience. Che's image has been used by many contemporary Latin American political movements in a straightforwardly inspirational, creative and radical way. In the small towns of Chiapas, Che's image appears in banners that are made either collectively or by single artists or in murals, which are often chosen as background for photographs of the Zapatistas. An integral part of a long revolutionary tradition of the continent that brings together the revolutionaries Emiliano Zapata, Simón Bolívar, Manuelita Saenz and Che Guevara with the Zapatistas, Che's image attains a symbolic function in the struggle and the everyday life of the indigenous communities, setting a narrative of modern man's struggle for human emancipation and self-determination (Subcomandante Marcos, 2002: 104).

The Zapatistas have invented new radical ways to re-appropriate and re-radicalise the oft reproduced image of Che. Indicatively, the banners of Che, along with other references to local history and culture, featured in the highly symbolic march, known as Zapatour, led by twenty four Zapatista commanders including Marcos between February and April 2001. This march of indigenous people outside Chiapas, following the route that Zapata took in 1914 through the Mexican countryside, visited several communities along the way and ended up in the Mexican congress, encouraging a dialogue with civil society. In another

¹ For a detailed analysis of the appropriation of Che's image see: Trisha Ziff (ed.) (2006).

instance, Marcos was photographed in the easily recognisable red-and-black poster style of Che for the cover of the Guardian, manipulating the mass media obsession with his hidden identity (Guardian Weekend 2001). The cover line 'Why Marcos is the Che Guevara of his generation' was followed by Naomi Klein's analysis of the theory of Zapatismo and the position of Marcos within a non-hierarchical democratic indigenous community in insurrection. Marcos's deep understanding of the power of visual imagery for the sustainability of the struggle and his self-conscious interaction with the media and construction of an image for media spectacle subverts Max Horkheimer's statement that the 'mass media assimilate the revolution by absorbing its leaders into their list of celebrities' (Max Horkheimer 1978: 112). Marx once asserted that in all revolutions the dead are resurrected for the 'purpose of glorifying the new struggles' (1979: 101). So are their images, one could add.

references

- Debord, G. (1994) *The society of the spectacle*. New York: Zone Books.
- Heath, J. and A. Potter (2004) *The rebel sell: How the counterculture became consumer culture*. Canada: Harper Collins.
- Guardian Weekend*, March 3rd 2001.
- Horkheimer, M. (1978) 'The Authoritarian State' in A. Arato, E. Gebhardt (eds.) *The essential Frankfurt school reader*. New York: Urizen Books.
- Marx, K. (1979) 'The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected works, Vol. 11*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Subcomandante Marcos (2002) 'Today eighty-years later, history repeats itself', in *Our world is our weapon, selected writings*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Ziff, T. (ed.) (2006) *Che Guevara: Revolutionary and icon*. London: V&A Publications.

the author

Antigoni Memou is Lecturer in the School of Arts and Digital Industries at the University of East London. Her book *Photography and social movements: From the globalisation of the movement (1968) to the movement against globalisation (2001)* is to be published by Manchester University Press in 2013.

E-mail: a.memou@uel.ac.uk