

Gandhi and Guevara: Notes for A Possible

Alejandro Bendaña

Introduction

After all that has been said and written on Gandhi and nonviolent action, we continue to discover the richness and universality of his thought as applied to evolving situations in diverse latitudes and over time.

I would like to refer to contemporary social movements in Latin America--a large generalization in itself--to explore their implicit approximations to Satyagraha. Specifically, to contextualize what may be three levels of approximation--religious roots, the ideal of self-realization and method/technique--in Gandhi's Satyagraha in order to suggest not simply their relevance but to the process or reinvigoration of action and thought for deep social change.

During the 1960s and almost through the early 1980s, coming from a classic left tradition, many of Latin America's social revolutionary movements would have had trouble with the notion that there could be a non-violent path to political and social revolution. Second, and also in very general terms, there would be an underestimation on the importance of personal revolution, as understood by Gandhi, that went hand in hand, as opposed to becoming derivative, from social revolution. Soul force, as understood by Gandhi, would have been associated with spiritual development; whereas for the classical marxist-leninist personal force and potential was linked to material consciousness and the development of material forces in and through an equitable form of socio-economic organization.

What Latin American Latin American strugglers could not understand was the implication that the Satyagraha approach to non-violent action could defeat the murderous US-backed militaries or that the spirit could prevent weapons from being fired. As Che remarked once, Gandhi has no relevance here....

One may however disagree but it must be admitted that the savage sixties did not provide the most favorable circumstances for any young Latin American idealist to understand the different levels of understanding the Gandhian approach, and just as important, to relate those understandings to the very difficult circumstances and audiences of that time.

The circumstances, and to some degree that audience has changed. And before going any further one would suggest that the armed sacrifice of thousands in Latin America as elsewhere has opened the possibility to a better understanding and application of Gandhian thought. It is not, in my opinion, a method of substituting a "correct" for an "incorrect" approach or method of struggle, not that one was wrong and the other right, but rather, viewed in historical terms,

to point to the evolution and evolving synthesis as witnessed in the practice of non-violent mobilization today.

We review therefore the movements in terms of Gandhi's approach, and not Gandhi in terms of the movements. Whether we agree or disagree with Gandhi is not that important; what is important is the incorporation of Gandhi's thought to the process of a search for alternatives in Latin America and elsewhere, as a means of enhancing our capacities and willingness to seek Truth and to incorporate the person--ours We--in that reflection and change process.

One need be a specialist nor read everything said by or about Gandhi. There is no avoiding our own historical-life "biases" or rooting in or own past that may or may enhance or blind our perceptions of one or another aspect of the Satyagraha. Perhaps Gandhi himself would not be critical of those who judge and interpret his thought in their own ways, as long as it is in keeping with the endless quest search for what is True, to search for an Alternative of that which is posed dishonestly to the only truth and the end of history.

Between Guevara and Gandhi

Times are not good in much of Central America, unless one reaches back twenty-five years and recalls the situation in Nicaragua, Guatemala or El Salvador. Highly repressive military regimes that persecuted, killed or exiled opposition figures, peoples suffering from atrocious levels of poverty and exclusion, with most of the Catholic Church and certainly the United States government on the side of the regimes. It was in this context, and in a similar state of repression prevailing in countries as in Cuba in the 1950s along with the infamous national security states in Argentina, Uruguay and elsewhere through the 1970s, that many young idealist or even reformers or simply Christians took up weapons joining or forming guerrilla movements. Broadly speaking, they came to the conclusion that armed struggle was the only means left to defend human rights and insure national self-determination and take over the state in order to carry out indispensable social and economic reforms.

The Argentine-born Che Guevara set the model. An internationalist who fought along side Fidel Castro and came to very high ranking positions in the Cuban revolutionary government, Che left Cuba to help join or help start armed insurrectionary movements in Africa and later in Bolivia until he was captured and killed, along with other internationalists, in October, 1967.

In Latin America there is no escaping the importance of symbols as forces of change. For better or for worse, that symbol takes the form of the martyr weapon in hand falling in battle (Jose Marti, Farabundo Marti, Emiliano Zapata, Augusto Sandino, Camilo Torres and Che Guevara).

Some, then and now, have taken his identification with revolutionary violence and the promotion of the subjective as pure voluntarism, termed adventurist then and anachronistic now. Che however was very clear in his condemnation of terrorism and always emphasized that where social causes could be advanced by juridical-electoral means those spaces had to be utilized as much as possible. That armed struggle was the last not the first option and very much geared to the particular conditions in each nation.

There is no need to apologize then for Che or simply turn him into an icon of a mistaken past. In Central America today, as in other countries, it is impossible to conceive of the minimal democratic liberties without the revolutionaries who gave their blood and fought against the dictatorships. Twentieth century marxists whose ultimate achievement may be to have brought 19th century liberal political institutions about? History will judge but in the context of where countries such as Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala or South Africa were just some 25 years ago, such an accomplishment may well be judged revolutionary.

Guevara therefore is not a martyr or someone who had a death wish, as some biographers have proclaimed. He was a person that called in his work and example other human beings to sacrifice. It was Régis Debray rather in his unfortunate essay *Revolution in the Revolution*--a book which he now disowns--that insisted upon polemizing with many established Communist Parties exaggerating the guerilla component in revolutionary strategy and in Che's thinking, leaving both open to right wing distortions. What is clear is that Che himself had no role in provoking such distortions and indeed if we look closely at his *Diary in Bolivia*, we notice a number of critical comments to Debray's book written along the margins, and his distrust of someone like Debray.

Unfortunately not only Debray but also many well-intentioned revolutionaries on the continent fell prey to the trap of simplifying and reproducing the Cuban "foco" experience, sometimes with disastrous and tragic results. Che was not responsible for this and on more than one occasion alerted revolutionaries as to the danger of drawing the wrong lessons from the Cuban revolutionary armed struggle. "Foquismo" as it came to be known will confuse

means (the armed struggle) with the ends (the political project) therefore leaving no other form of political practice open other than violence.

Clearly this was not Guevara's vision (nor in fact the actual practice of the Cuban struggle). Rather what we find in Che is an intimate and complex dialectic between the individual devoted to the revolutionary cause and the individual devoted to the collective. Self-formation gives way to collective formation, and viceversa. Che is a revolutionary because he was first a humanist; he constructs his own person on a humane and ethical base to thereupon contribute testimony and action to the human formation of others, to their revolutionary formation.

Guevara indeed taught us lessons incredibly relevant for our neoliberal times. His insistence there could be no separation between the individual and the community, no divorce between personal ethics and politics. Of the difficulty in constructing or strategizing for socialism with capitalist methods or mechanisms--a difficulty today admitted by the Cuban leadership.

Practice and the Ethical/Religious Imperative

An emphasis on the ideals of Guevara and Gandhi could well lead to a neglect of the role of historical practice that for both of them was inseparable from the ideal itself. We begin however with the ideals, as Gandhi himself did in saying, "My politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion". The outward and the inward, as he said, were "purely a matter of emphasis with me. The outward has no meaning to me at all except insofar as it helps the inward". (8) In a broader sense, the starting point is morality, as human beings are along capable of morality that springs from free will and which in turn leads to self-realization. This is as much a question of opportunity as one of duty for both Guevara and Gandhi. Love and struggle (non-violence for Gandhi) are approximated by the willingness to sacrifice and to renounce accommodation thereby conquering all fear, including the fear of death.

But the goal is also social because moksha or self-realization also entails the collective aspiration of promoting the realization of a higher moral statue in others. There is a social side of Satyagraha provoked however by the compelling presence or "soul force" generated from within individuals capable of projecting itself over time and distances provoking heightened awareness or consciousness in others who are part of a single humanity.

In this context, whether Guevara or Gandhi were "successful" in their own time is not as important as their common capacity to mount a continuing challenge, decades after their death, stressing the universal spirit and the integral nature of the revolutionary.

Ends and Means: Ahimsa

Ahimsa is often translated as action based on the refusal to do harm: a renunciation as it were, of the will to kill or damage. This no doubt was the overriding goal--the extinction of killing and destruction, hate and harm, including oppression and exploitation. Although ahimsa would not be consistent with taking up arms to defeat perceived evil, we would also remember that, like the search for Truth, the practice of Ahimsa is a goal that can only be approached and perhaps never completely realized. According to Sonnleitner, Gandhi himself never claimed to be a "non-violent person", let alone a "Mahatma" in a rejection of the perfection or absolute implicit in those terms, and in such practice.

Guevara would have been the first to admit that the "truth" that is based on superior physical strength, that is the product of confrontation and active resistance, is not absolute, and indeed is imperfect. He argued that to challenge imperialism or a dictatorship, given their structural and global rooting, was almost certainly to invite the use of force against as retaliation. He scoffed at the notion that, under particular circumstances, that will power alone could force the synthesis of the new truth of justice and universal non-violence. There could be no agreement with imperialism, because there was no truth in imperialism--that critical rationale that would allow the contender (oppressed) to "convert" rather than coerce. Yet if the opponent seized to be imperialist then there could be a basis for finding truth.

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