



## Che's travels: the making of a revolutionary in 1950s Latin America

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revolutionary violence – as opposed to those ‘revisionists’ who argue that the explanation for violence is to be found in ideology (i.e. that it is provoked by bad people with crazy ideas), or, Grandin adds, as opposed to the notion that violence is unanalysable – serves as a sort of inspiration for the volume. Although several contributors refer to Mayer’s work, it was unclear to me that his approach added much, beyond a useful taxonomy, to what for the most part are excellent case studies based on careful archival work that broaden our understanding of Latin America’s experience of the Cold War in the twentieth century.

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**Che’s travels: the making of a revolutionary in 1950s Latin America**, edited by Paulo Drinot, Durham, NC, and London, Duke University Press, 2010, 306 pp.

Like most travellers, Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara set out on his adventures with a set of pre-conceived notions of what he would find in foreign lands. In the Latin America of the 1950s, he largely found what he sought: poor rural people, repressive governments, and lots of ‘authentic’ Indians. Unlike most travellers, Guevara wrote about his sojourns and then took part in one of the seminal events of the 20th century, the Cuban Revolution, vaulting his youthful ruminations into the sphere of a sort of international revolutionary canon. Avoiding this ideological glare, what emerges in the essays of this volume is less what Guevara wisely perceived and savvily analysed in his trips around the hemisphere than what he clearly missed or wilfully misunderstood.

Paulo Drinot set a formidable task in this edited volume. Taking the cinematic success of the 2004 Walter Salles film *The Motorcycle Diaries* as a starting point, Drinot and his contributors offer a country by country explanation of Guevara’s experiences in the Latin American countries that he visited on two separate itineraries in 1951–52 and 1953–56. The volume aims to explain ‘how Guevara’s Latin American travels *produced* Che and how Che simultaneously *produced* Latin America through his travelogues . . . [and] how Latin America has *reproduced* Che’ since his revolutionary emergence in 1956 (p. 2). It is most successful in the first point as many of the authors demonstrate the linkage between Guevara’s initial interpretations and how those were confirmed by his travels. In many ways, his experiences on the road served to harden pre-existing beliefs into the core of his later revolutionary thought.

In this uniformly excellent volume, several points stood out to this reviewer. Eduardo Elena explores the intellectual antecedents of the young Guevara, outlining

how his travels were both 'anti-conformist' and deeply suffused with nationalist ideals (pp. 22–23). Malcolm Deas posits that 'without the Cuban Revolution, all Colombian guerrillas would have died out in the early 1960s' (p. 131). His fine chapter is enriched further by concurrent reading of the notes, which branch into very fertile questions about the region as a whole. Cindy Forster demonstrates that Guevara was deeply affected by the CIA-sponsored overthrow of the Jacobo Arbenz government in Guatemala in 1954 and that he and members of the Guatemalan Left 'drew the same moral about armed struggle' from what they had seen: revolutions had to defend themselves with violence (p. 211). Finally, Eric Zolov argues suggestively that while Emiliano Zapata became the central figure for '*nationalist* resistance' among activist youths in Mexico in the 1960s, their choice for '*internationalist* solidarity' was always Che Guevara (p. 247).

This fascinating volume of essays, organised as it is in country-by-country analyses, offers readers of all specialisations a path to explore the historical moments that Guevara passed through at the outset of the Cold War in Latin America.

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