

DEBRAY—NARODNIK REVIVAL

A GREAT DEAL OF INTEREST HAS been evoked in revolutionary and progressive circles in India, as elsewhere in the world, by snippets of news about Regis Debray's work.^o The author's courage and fidelity to his cause, underlined by the barbarous imprisonment he is undergoing in Bolivia, have added a certain emotional element to this interest. Some tragic feeling, too, with the martyrdom of Che Guevara. For it is quite obvious that while the writing is, indeed, that of Debray, the ideas are essentially those of the dead guerrilla hero, his reflections upon the Cuban revolution and its relevance for the Latin-American upheaval.

This is essentially a book about tactics. If it does raise philosophical issues these emerge from the premises and conclusions implicit in the tactics. It is not a fundamental book in a philosophical or even theoretical sense *per se*. Quite contrary to what has been put forth in some quarters there is nothing of a 'challenge' to the revolutionary spirit of the Marxist outlook in Debray's book. It simply does not operate at that level. All it proposes is a particular type of revolution which it feels would suit Latin America better than any of the prototypes so far available, that is, Cuba and Fidel are better guides in this region than Russia and Lenin or China and Mao or Vietnam and Giap. It is when he elaborates why this is so that Debray displays an attitude of mind that is certainly a 'challenge' to Marxism.

The booklet (it is only 128 pages) begins with a disquisition about avoiding 'false starts' through attempting to transplant

^o *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America* by Regis Debray, *Monthly Review*, New York, 1967.

revolutionary experiences from one region and time to another both temporally and spatially different, sound advice but not particularly new. And not followed by Debray in the rest of the booklet (indeed, in the rest of the introductory disquisition) where it is repeatedly insisted that Cuba's path of revolution, as interpreted by Guevara and revealed by Debray, is the only path for all Latin America and even for Africa. Why this should be so and why in this case the sound advice has to be brushed aside is not explained. Indeed, this failure to explain is quite in keeping with the general dogmatic approach of the author, at least as revealed in this work.

This is quite evident in the discussion on so-called armed selfdefence. 'The failure of armed selfdefence', we are told, 'corresponds on the military level to the failure of reformism on the political level... Oligarchical dictatorships pose the alternative of beginning to destroy them *en bloc* or of accepting them *en bloc*: there is no middle way'. It is in this strange manner that the idea is developed that armed selfdefence, that is, the rousing of the masses to armed struggle through their own experience and the growth of nationwide armed revolt in one form or another based on the revolutionised masses, is betrayal of the revolution.

The point is sought to be illustrated by reference to the Cuban experience. It is said that guerrilla warfare passes through several stages: first, the stage of establishment; second, the stage of development; third, the stage of revolutionary offensive. It is actually the first stage around which all the controversy hinges. When and how should revolutionary armed struggle, even in the guerrilla form, be started?

Debray reveals his outlook when he states that at the first stage 'the initial group experiences at the outset a period of absolute nomadism... The revolutionary guerrilla force is clandestine. It is born and develops secretly... The guerrilla force is independent of the civilian population, in action as well as in military organisation, consequently it need not assume the direct defence of the peasant population.'

The meaning is rubbed home in the contrast that is sought to be drawn between the so-called Cuban and Vietnamese experiences. 'Differences between Vietnam and Latin America lead to the following contrast: Whereas in Vietnam the military pyramid is built from the base up, in Latin America on the other hand it tends to be built from the apex down.'

The Latin-American guerrilla is asked to give up all notions of remaining so closely connected with the people as to be hidden from the enemy. Mao's famous dictum that the armed forces should be 'like fish in the sea of the people' is declared outright to be invalid for Latin America.

What it really boils down to is the assertion that in Latin America the guerrilla must not only wage armed struggle on behalf of the masses but must impose armed struggle on the masses. Armed struggle is no longer the highest form of struggle by the masses but an intellectual idea that is later to be accepted by the foolish, docile masses. 'From the apex down as compared to from the base up' is nothing but a serving up of the very familiar anarchist ideas popularised by Bakunin and made into a regular obstacle to the development of the revolutionary movement by the narodniks who had to be ideologically and practically demolished by the bolsheviks, above all by Lenin himself. It is also akin to the ideology of 'roving insurgents' mentioned by Mao as one among the serious deviations to be avoided when he commenced his theoretical generalisation of China's armed revolution. He mentioned it as the idea of the lumpen elements of Chinese society.

This outlook is further developed in a full chapter devoted to a polemic against the concept of setting up a guerrilla base or liberated area as the Chinese fighters had done some decades ago. Poor Sweezy and Huberman—the editors of *Monthly Review* which has published the English translation of Debray's work—are called both 'sinister and ridiculous' for having suggested in some previous article that Castro had built up a liberated area. Evidently, he had not—so we are now to be informed. It is now stated that the Cuban guerrilla force did

not even attempt for 17 months to have a fixed base or even to depend on a security zone. Prior to the preparation for the final offensive 'the guerrilla base is, according to an expression of Fidel, the territory in which the guerrilla happens to be moving; it goes wherever he goes. In the initial stage the base of support is in the guerrilla fighter's knapsack'. In not a single page of this polemic—nor indeed anywhere else throughout the booklet—is the question even so much as discussed as to what is to be done to secure mass support for the guerrilla, even if we assume that the armed guerrilla struggle is started off by a batch of radical intellectuals.

The major portion of the second half of Debray's work is devoted to explaining as to why in Latin America all the existing communist parties have to be thrown overboard and replaced not by any other political organisation but by the guerrilla band. A guerrilla group is called upon to establish itself as the political vanguard of the Latin-American revolution, to learn all the politics it wants only and absolutely through its own armed operations.

Even the best of communists, according to Debray, who have not physically joined the guerrillas are 'objective traitors'.

'When a guerrilla group communicates with city leadership or its representatives abroad, it is dealing with "its" bourgeoisie'. A little later it is stated: 'As we know, the mountain proletarianises the bourgeois and peasant elements, and the city can bourgeoisify the proletarians.'

One is tempted to ask as to where we are now to put Fidel Castro and those who accept Debray's ideas but are living in Havana? Are the guerrillas in other Latin-American countries to regard them also as 'their bourgeoisie'? Or, if they are to be exempted, one would like to know the reasons for their singularity. One would also like to know what is the reason for all the international conferences held at Havana, the solidarity organisations that are set up there and the like when Debray would have us believe that the Latin-American guerrilla must

avoid all this like the very plague. He makes fun of any and all attempts to build united fronts even within the country where the guerrillas operate, let alone international organisations.

There is a detailed examination of the experience of China and Vietnam where the role of the *political* vanguard, that is the communist party, in the armed struggle has always been highlighted and always insisted upon, no matter what the 'cultural revolutionaries' are up to these days. It is then asserted that since the Latin-American communist parties made a false start 30 to 40 years ago, there is no question of there being a repetition of the Chinese or Vietnamese experience in this region.

'The guerrilla movement begins by creating unity within itself around the most urgent military tasks, which have already become political tasks, a unity of nonparty elements and of all the parties represented among the *guerrilleros*. The most decisive political choice is membership in the guerrilla forces, in the armed forces of liberation. Thus gradually this small army creates and wins its first victories. Eventually, the future people's army will beget the party of which it is to be, theoretically, the instrument: essentially the party is the army. . . The guerrilla force is the party in embryo. . .

'In the long run, certain regions of America, for dialectical reasons, will not need to choose between a vanguard party and a popular army. But for the moment there is a historically based order of tasks. The people's army will be the nucleus of the party, not vice versa. That is why, at the present juncture, the principal stress must be laid on the development of guerrilla warfare and not on the strengthening of existing parties or the creation of new parties.' (Emphasis in original.)

The thesis, thus, is that not only are local communists, of whatever political understanding (the Maoists are specifically mentioned as representing a false alternative), to be shunned but no new political group or leading force is to be set up. The guerrillas have just to keep on fighting and that, too, without bothering about the masses. Suddenly, at some time a political

leadership will develop. In the meantime, Debray's thesis will be their only comfort together with obedience to Havana.

We have here an even clearer case than that of Maoism in its latest phase of anarchism within the revolutionary movement. The petty-bourgeois intellectual base of it is also clear, as compared to the petty-peasant base of Maoism. And this anarchism plays a dual role. It is revolutionary to the extent that it is anti-imperialist and can become a transitional stage for some revolutionaries on the way to the acceptance of Marxism. But when it poses as an alternative to Marxism or tries to present itself as Marxism it plays a positively harmful role. It acts as a diversion, a detour, a blind alley. It handicaps not only those who are intoxicated by its fuming phrases but leads them to acts of desperation and disruption which harm the whole revolutionary movement. Instead of directing the edge of its attack against imperialism, it believes its main role to be that of the new messiah who has to throw out the 'false' prophets. It, therefore, directs the energy of many young, splendid revolutionaries against the communist movement. It, therefore, commits that very 'objective treason' of which it accuses the communists.

But its influence is likely to be very shortlived, of even less duration than the temporary appeal of Maoism as a so-called alternative revolutionary ideology. Its course is so reckless that its historical stupidity is all the quicker demonstrated. Debray's 'new' gospel, besides, is the old narodnik nonsense which Marxism had encountered and vanquished six decades ago. The iron march of the proletarian battalions, not petty-bourgeois frenzy, is what Lenin recommended.

This is true today in Latin America and elsewhere.

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