

CHE: THE MISUNDERSTOOD ICON

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Abstract

This research explores the origin and development of the icon that Che Guevara has become. It attempts to explain the reasons for his enduring popularity as a symbol over the years. The focus of my research is on how and why Che Guevara has become such a popular global icon among young people across the world. Several factors contributed to the origin of Che as an icon, such as: The fact that he lived and died in the sixties, the way in which he died, his physical appearance, and his ambiguous ideas. These factors have led to the endurance of his image throughout the years. Today, Che's image is often misunderstood or misinterpreted, and there is a lack of knowledge among the users of the icon. This research concludes that Che Guevara has become a versatile icon, highly commercialized for consumers who like the Che fashion, but know little about the real person behind the image.

“Long live the rebel in all of us...there's no cooler iconic image than Che! New colors SAGE or POWDER BLUE have arrived, and we still have a few left in sand or purple,” reads the description of the babies' latest fashion at an online baby store (<http://www.lalaling.com>). “Che lives!” says a shirt on a subway rider. The word “Revolution” appears on Che Guevara watches at the New York Public Library gift store. The baby or the person wearing the Che icon is exhibiting something considered “cool” by many people. However, the New York Public Library's act of selling Che Guevara watches was not considered cool at all. Jay Nordingler, Managing Editor for the National Review Online, says that the watches caused much outrage among Cuban-Americans,

not only for selling the icon in such a place, but because the librarians questioned did not know much about who Che Guevara was or his link with Fidel Castro (2004, p. 28). As a result, the New York Public Library was forced to remove the watches from its store in order to keep the public happy.

The example of the New York Public Library's gift store demonstrates the lack of information behind the image. The store probably ordered the watches because they were a good deal, and unintentionally offended those who knew enough about Che Guevara's life to disagree with the idea of him as an icon. Whether he was an assassin or a hero is not really the big issue in the wearing of his image today. The massive fascination of young people with this icon is in ignorance of Che Guevara's ideals. In fact, the majority of young people do not even think about why they wear Che's image, or they assign their own message to the image of Che, making the man and his ideals a versatile symbol that can adjust to any message the consumer wants to transmit.

The person behind the widely likable icon is Ernesto Guevara de la Serna. He was born on June 14 of 1928 in Rosario, Argentina (Castañeda, 1998). Ernesto was nicknamed "Che" because *Che* is a word widely used in Argentina at the end or beginning of a sentence. Che said it all the time as he spoke, and it translates into something like "pal" (O'Hagan, 2004, para. 22). Later in his life, he officially adopted "Che" as his middle name. According to Anderson (1997), Che endured a terrible case of asthma for all his life. Because of this fact, he decided to graduate from medicine. However, he seldom practiced as a doctor. Instead, he became a revolutionary in Mexico upon meeting Fidel Castro; together, they trained soldiers and joined forces to invade Cuba. The invasion of Cuba in 1959 was Che Guevara's biggest accomplishment (Castañeda, 1998). Che became Castro's most trusted person after Raul (Castro's brother). Castro made Che a Cuban citizen, and named him Minister of Industries (Anderson, 1997). However, Che still wanted to do more for the world. He wanted to bring the revolution to other countries (Castañeda, 1998). He tried to organize guerrillas in the Congo, in Argentina, and in Bolivia (Anderson, 1997).

According to Bonachea and Valdes, Che's ideas were influenced by Karl Marx. Che believed that he could change undeveloped countries by turning them toward socialism, especially Latin America (Bonachea & Valdes, 1969). Che thought that the only way to triumph over capitalism was through revolution. Due to Che Guevara's success in Cuba, he appeared to be capable of anything; his outstanding willpower was his virtue and his defect (if he had to kill, he did). He was also a very controversial figure because he expressed his thoughts openly, without regard to what others would think or the trouble his words could bring. In 1967, Che was captured and killed in Bolivia (Anderson, 1997). In 1997, his remains were also found in this country. In actuality, they are in a mausoleum in Cuba. (O'Hagan, para. 2).

The origin of the popularity of Che Guevara's image starts with his life and death during the sixties. The fact that Che Guevara's success and failure took place in the beginning of the sixties contributed to the immortalization of his portrait. According to Castañeda (1998), everything that emerged in the sixties has remained through time, especially cultural facts (p. 409). Castañeda (1998) argues that if Che Guevara had lived in a time other than the sixties, he would not be as idolized as he is now. "Had Che perished in the Congo two years earlier, or in Argentina sometime later, the singular harmony between the man and the epoch might not have come about" (p. 391).

Che Guevara became famous while he was alive during the sixties, but it was also during the sixties that Che Guevara's death took place, and that is perhaps one of the most important factors that contributed to the origin of his use as an icon. He was thirty-nine, a young age to die; he should have had many years ahead of him and, according to Castañeda (1998), perhaps Che could have accomplished many other successes if he had lived. "He would still have achieved epic feats and lived a glorious life, but his face would not appear on millions of T-shirts decades later" (p. 391). During the sixties, following Che Guevara's death, a slogan also emerged and helped his immortalization. O'Hagan (2004) says that the slogan "Che Lives!" originated and began to appear on walls all over the world in 1968 (para. 3), reassuring his admirers that

Che was alive. Today, this slogan continues to appear, along with Che Guevara's face. But what exactly is alive remains obscure.

The unique face that perhaps many readers of this paper have seen on T-shirts is the one photographed by Alberto Korda. According to Honor and Fleming (1992), the Cuban photographer took the photograph in 1960 at a public meeting in Cuba (p. 849). According to Castañeda (1998), the newspapers were jam-packed with pictures, and Korda's picture was ignored. It was not until 1967 that a publisher from Italy, Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, visited Cuba in search of potential pictures of Che Guevara, because he wanted to be ready for the media in case Che died in Bolivia (p. 195). Feltrinelli chose Korda's picture, and ironically, it cost him nothing.

A few months later, Che died, and Feltrinelli came up with what became the most famous poster of Che Guevara. Korda's picture depicts Che with a black beret, disheveled hair, and a beard, wearing a jacket instead of his usual olive green uniform. In the picture, Che is staring toward the horizon with a valiant, firm, and hopeful look. The background of the picture is a beautiful, clear sky, making him seem to be a symbol of idealism. Honour and Fleming (1992) say that this famous photograph added to Che Guevara's fame, and he immediately gained "universal recognition as a potent icon" (p. 849). Moreover, they state that Che came to be a symbol of "many aspirations" among students (p. 850).

During the late sixties, young student protesters needed an icon to symbolize their feelings against the Vietnam War, and it was Che who filled that vacant space. In 1968, students around the world took part in mutinies, and Che was the best icon to identify with, due to the release of the poster and his recent death (Castañeda, 1998). Castañeda writes that just after a few weeks of Guevara's death, the Vietnam War continued to release rage everywhere, especially among college students. There were protests at New York's Columbia University; in Paris, students revolted in the Latin Quarter; in Mexico, marching students in the plaza of Tlatelolco were killed while protesting (Castañeda, 1998, p. 392). All of these students had something in common. They were holding posters of Alberto Korda's picture of Che. Castañeda says that

“it was Che Guevara’s death at that particular time that allowed him to voice the desires and dreams of the millions who bore his image” (p. 392). In the seventies, the use of the image of Che continued, this time in the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (one of the most important universities in the country). According to Benavides-Vanegas (2005), for several years the students damaged the statue of one known Colombian figure named Santander (an advocate for the law), and painted a giant graffiti of Che Guevara’s face. They also replaced the plaza’s name, “Plaza Santander,” for “Plaza Che Guevara” (p. 55). After ten years and several attempts to restore the statue of Santander, the university finally gave up and the plaza became “Plaza Che Guevara” (Benavides-Vanegas, 2005, p. 56). This is an example of both the need for an icon and the premature misinterpretation of Che Guevara. Students put somebody in their plaza that was not from their country, did not obey laws, had a disorganized appearance (opposite to Santander) and had little interest in their own country; yet they felt that Che was their hero. Perhaps Che Guevara’s image helped them to communicate their rebelliousness, but the real meaning of his life was either misunderstood or unknown.

During the sixties, seventies, eighties, nineties, and in the present, Che Guevara’s image has endured among students. However, to rely on the sixties as the cause of the icon’s increased fame is not enough. Several other factors contribute to the popularity of Che’s image, such as the way Che died, and his attractiveness, which led to the versatility of the icon.

The way Che died, after combat in the jungles of Bolivia, is an important factor in the popularity of the icon. His death evokes a feeling of compassion, with its similarities to the death of Jesus. According to Anderson (1997), Che weighed about 110 pounds when they found him, and he was almost unrecognizable because of the overgrown hair and the months spent starving in the jungle. When the Bolivian Army captured Che, he could barely walk; however, they made him walk all the way to an abandoned school called “La Higuera” (Anderson, 1997). People gathered at the side of the path to watch the unrecognizable Che struggle over to the school.

After Che spent the day enclosed in an old classroom (there were no prisons in the town), a lieutenant named Mario Teran shot him in the chest six times (Castañeda, 1998). According to Anderson, Teran was specifically instructed not to shoot him in the face so that people would recognize him (Anderson, 1997). Che was asked if he wanted to say his last words, and according to Castañeda, he said: "Tell Fidel that this failure does not mean the end of the revolution...tell Aleida to forget this, remarry and be happy, and keep the children studying. Ask the soldiers to aim well." (Castañeda, 1998, p. 401). Anderson (1997) describes this as well, but adds that the oral account throughout the years is that he said, "Shoot coward, you are only going to kill a man" (p. 739). Then, several members of the Bolivian army started debating whether to decapitate him or cut off his hands. They decided on the latter and buried his body secretly in the jungle (Castañeda, 1998).

His death became widely known, making headlines in newspapers all around the world with another powerful picture taken by Freddy Alborta. With this picture, Castañeda (1998) says, "The Christlike image prevailed" and Che's admirers reinforced their slogan "Che lives!" (xiv). In this picture, Che is dead, with wide-open eyes slightly smiling as if he were saying Jesus' words: "forgive them God, because they do not know what they are doing." The news media made a figure like Che Guevara into a martyr, and more susceptible to immortality. The more a person suffers in life, and the more tragic his or her death is, the more the consumers of their images sympathize with them. One example of this is Frida Kahlo, who, according to Mencimer (2002), because of her suffering and her commercialized image, she is "The female Che Guevara" (p. 26).

Apart from Che Guevara's death, there is another fact that makes him a widely likable icon: his attractiveness. According to O'Hagan (2004), Che Guevara would not be portrayed so widely if he were not good-looking (para. 12). O'Hagan (2004) explains that when Paul Webster, the film producer of "The Motorcycle Diaries," was asked why he did not choose to make a movie of Fidel Castro, he answered, "There is no myth around Castro. Che was young and beautiful, and that...is what underpins the

myth” (as qtd. in O’Hagan, para. 12). Castañeda (1998) also mentions that Che was “good-looking, sure of himself, and, according to his friends, fairly forward with women” (p. 37).

The magic Che created around himself is evident in any biography of him. People who encountered Che Guevara were usually astounded by his charm and appearance. Daniels (2004) describes the reaction of a journalist from Britain who met Che in 1963. The journalist claims that, “...with his trademark black beret, and with his shirt open to the waist. He was incredibly beautiful” (as qtd. in Daniels, p. 22). However, Daniels thinks he looked more like “a man distinctly unwashed” (p. 22). As always, beauty is a matter of opinion. Whether or not people consider him to be good-looking, Che is a romantic hero with a face that is attractive enough to exhibit for everybody, on anything, and for everything. Far from the real meaning of his life, Che is a nice-looking worldwide multipurpose icon.

There are two reasons why Che is appealing to people worldwide, regardless of race. One is his extensive traveling to other countries as a public figure from Cuba. He was widely recognized in China, the Soviet Union, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the United States (Castañeda, 1998). The populations of these countries embrace almost all races in the world. The other reason is that his physique itself was not stereotypical of “Hispanic,” “Asiatic,” or any other racial group. According to Harris (2000), “His eyes and mustache appear Asiatic, the darkness of his complexions seems Negroid, and the shape of his nose and cheeks are distinctively European” (p. 243). Thus, the image of Che’s face does not comprise a single race, but rather embraces them all, making him a widely portrayed icon regardless of color or any particular features.

The “race-less” icon of Che Guevara took very little time to develop. Very soon after his death, Che became a legendary figure. Evidence of this is seen in a compilation of Che’s writings that was published by Bonachea and Valdes in 1969, only two years after his death. In its foreword, Martin C. Needler, a Director of Inter-American affairs of the University of New Mexico, describes the status of Che Guevara already becoming a mythic symbol: “as time

passes, in fact, the figure of the Cuban-Argentine revolutionary seems less and less to belong to history and more and more to the realm of legend and myth” (pp. xiii).

The rapidly obtained fame of the icon of Che Guevara is confirmed by Anderson, who writes that dying while defending what he stood for automatically made Che a hero (Anderson, 1997). That is the ambiguity that has led to the versatility of the icon today. What he stood for appears to undergo metamorphoses, and to adjust itself to every rally. An example of this is the students against the USSR who, back in the sixties, decided that Che Guevara’s poster would be a good one to use, without knowing that, for a great part of his life, Che was with the USSR, rather than against them (Castañeda, 1998, p. 395). Just like those students, people today give their own meanings to Che Guevara’s image, whether accurate or not. For instance, if there is a remonstrance of worker’s unions, Che is suitable; for immigrants’ rights, Che is suitable; and for any other imaginable rally, the image of Che would probably be there.

However, the versatility of the icon has a deeper origin: Che was very ambiguous himself. His ideals were often confusing. O’Hagan (2004) says that Che Guevara’s ideals were never precisely clear, and thus, they symbolize something “younger and freer” than anything that is seen as oppressive at any particular time (para. 3). According to Anderson, Che Guevara’s real ideals of “self-sacrifice, honesty, and dedication to the cause” (Anderson, 1997, p. xiv) were basically what inspired him throughout his life. Similarly, Castañeda thinks Che Guevara’s will and sacrifice were his basic principles. He describes Che as very brave, not only at the moment of his death, but throughout his life; fighting despite his severe asthma, speaking his opinions openly, and risking everything for his beliefs (Castañeda, 1998). Che Guevara himself wrote helpful hints about his ideals in the last letters to his family. “A will power that I have polished with the delight of an artist’s care will sustain these shaky legs and weary lungs,” he wrote in the good-bye letter to his parents (Bonachea & Valdes, 1969, p. 424). In the good-bye letter to his children, he wrote, “be capable of feel-

ing deeply any injustice committed against anyone anywhere in the world” (Bonachea & Valdes, 1969, p. 426).

As his ideas are customized to people, his image is also customized to products. For detergent, beer, baby clothing... and plenty of other products, Che makes a good icon. Whether consciously or unconsciously, people buy products with Che Guevara’s image because that is what is “in”. Che has turned into a “functional cultural icon,” which according to Lause and Nachbar (1992), means that his image is being used on objects that have another use besides depicting a picture (p. 194). It is because Che Guevara’s image has started to appear on useful items (mugs, key rings, soap, cigarettes, underwear, and so on) that people are driven away from the real meaning of Che; because the object portraying the image already has another purpose, they do not have to think about the real meaning of the image but the appearance. For example, “it is a cool mug,” or a “mug of Che,” not Che on the mug. The same happens with Che Guevara T-shirts.

Usually, people (mostly young students) who wear Che Guevara T-shirts today know little about him. Daniels (2004) says that, “With few exceptions, the devotees of the cult of Guevara know little about him or what he actually stood for” (p. 22). For instance, there is an anecdote of a student who according to Nordlinger (2004) was protesting against the death penalty with a Che Guevara beret (p. 30). What this student probably did not know is that Che himself executed several people with his own hands! (Castañeda 1998, p.106)

It is disappointing to see the misinterpretation of Che Guevara continuing today, but according to Lause and Nachbar (1992), it is a normal stage that all icons undergo over time. “Pure icons are the closest to conscious articulations of the cultural mind-set and are therefore very powerful, very obviously exploited and manipulated to bind the culture together, and very resonate with emotional meaning” (p. 173). This “emotional meaning” is that of rebelliousness, a longing to be different, a desire for revolution, and similar feelings that are usually prevalent in young people, hence the appeal of Che Guevara among youth.

Nordingler (2004) thinks that Che Guevara's image should not be portrayed on items, especially when the person displaying the icon does not know anything about Che; and he argues that it is usually the case. According to Nordingler (2004), among many different Che slogans for T-shirts, there is one that has Guevara's face, and beneath it reads, "I have no idea who this is" (p. 28). In my opinion, this would be the perfect shirt for almost everybody who wears the Che fashion. In people's compulsions either to belong, or to show that they are different, they wear the Che icon, which for some people, is seen as an insult to Cubans who lost friends or relatives in "La cabaña," the place where the ones who were considered a potential danger for the revolution, were killed against a wall called "el Paredon" (Castañeda, 1998, p. 106).

Moreover, Che Guevara wrote intensively. There are numerous books out there of Che, yet the consumers of his image do not take the time to read their hero's words. When you ask people wearing a Che T-shirt who he is, they usually have an answer ready: "He was a revolutionary." But after that, they do not know what to say. Daniels (2004) writes that after the movie *The Motorcycle Diaries* was released in 2004, people know a little more about their hero, not because they read Che's "tedious writings," but because they went to the movies! (p. 23). Daniels argues that the movie only shows the good aspects of Che's personality. He explains that it is as if Hitler were portrayed as "a vegetarian who loved animals and was against unemployment" (Daniels, 2004, p. 23). Although Daniels' analogy is exaggerated (Che would have needed to commit far more atrocities in order to be comparable to Hitler), it illustrates a good point. The movie was manipulated to please an audience who likes Che Guevara, but Che consumers would not know that unless they read about his life. There are several things the makers of the film either left out or manipulated. Daniels thinks the movie is a counterpart of the T-shirt (p. 25), just a highly commercialized item withdrawn from any real meaning.

On the other hand, consumers do not necessarily have to know the real meaning of Che's life; perhaps because Che is an icon, there is also a hidden meaning that people want to communicate by wearing his shirt. The message could be their dissatisfac-

tion with the Bush administration, the war in Iraq, a post-9/11 attitude or rage about how the world is today. Lause and Nachbar (1992) write that “Times of cultural stress result in these icons being replicated, displayed and attacked” (p. 173). They also give the example of the American flag: when people burn the flag, they are not just burning the fabric and the pole; they are saying something (Lause & Nachbar, 1992, pp. 173-174). The same could be happening with the Che phenomenon. People who wear Che Guevara T-shirts might not know who he was, or what he did, but they are communicating something.

However, what these people do not realize is that with the purchase of Che Guevara items, they are reinforcing globalization and consumerism – things Che Guevara himself detested. Today, capitalism has absorbed the world; consumerism lives even in the tribes of the Amazon; and Che Guevara’s image is part of this time, which, sadly, is the opposite of his extensive fight against imperialism. Today as O’Hagan (2004) says, “Che lives! All right, but not in the way he or his fellow revolutionaries could ever have imagined in their worst nightmares, he has become a global brand” (para. 7).

I believe that Che Guevara was probably one of the first people to openly address the problem of globalization and actively tried to do something about it. Today, as this problem continues to grow, so does the use of the image of Che. People who exhibit Che Guevara’s face should know about his life and his ideals, so that they can decide whether the icon they are displaying matches their standards, instead of contributing to more nonsensical commercialization of somebody who fought extensively against globalization.

In conclusion, although the meaning of Che Guevara has been forgotten, misinterpreted or reinvented, he “lives,” as the slogan says. He lives as an inspiration for artists, songwriters, movie-makers, fashion designers, and others. Today, Che is no longer the handsome, tall guy who stirred up the sixties with his ambiguous ideas. Instead he is a good-looking “functional” icon that brings a positive feeling to the people who identify with the image. Today, his image is overused, particularly in the country he hated most,

The United States, but that is the beautiful thing called “freedom of expression.” Che Guevara’s life is worth knowing, especially if you have a Che T-shirt in your closet. As Harris (2000) says, “Behind every historical legend there generally lies a reality far more fascinating and significant than the fabricated reality of the mythmakers” (p. 21).

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