

## DEBRAY DEVASTATED

IT HAS HAPPENED SOONER THAN one had thought. Debray who was boosted to the skies only a few months back as a new prophet of a new type of revolution is now disowned by his sponsors. *Revolution in the Revolution?* which had been held up as an alternative textbook for revolutionary action in Latin America and elsewhere, which would invalidate Marx, Lenin, Mao, Ho and all the 'revisionist' communist parties, is now accused of all the possible sins imaginable. And the interesting point is that all this is done under the editorship of Sweezy and Huberman who had earlier popularised the ideas of Debray and used him to pour ridicule and worse on all the communist parties, especially in Latin America. What is even more remarkable is that the criticism now being advanced is exactly that which was made earlier by the 'orthodox' communists. Unfortunately, neither the editors nor the essayists have the decency to acknowledge this but continue to slander the communist parties in the same words as the Debray they are now disowning.

The very first page of the special number of *Monthly Review* opens with a most revealing admission. The editors admit that Debray's book caused 'great excitement and press publicity, but few reviews that contributed substantially to the discussion Debray had opened.'

'Great excitement' can be explained by the fact that the book did articulate the petty-bourgeois anarchist moods that are quite prevalent in these days of popular awakening as also by the fact that the monopolists and imperialists launched a tremendous publicity campaign to build a halo around it. Lack of 'substantial review' can also be explained—all serious

reviewers saw through the froth and recognised the old anarchist shibboleths.

The only value that Sweezy and Huberman are now able to see in the Debray view is that it is a 'negation of the whole doctrine of revolutionary legitimacy', that is, the doctrine that since October 1917 all truly socially (as against nationally) revolutionary movements have been led by communist parties or been in the closest possible alliance with them, leading often to future merger. It is true that communists have been sectarian and slow to recognise the revolutionary merits of particular movements. It is also true, however, that as a generalised statement of the tendency of the world revolutionary process today and for the past five decades, the 'orthodox legitimacy' is correct. And it was the communist movement, acting precisely on the basis of this Leninist outlook, that set about rectifying its own sectarian lapses, especially after the 1956 twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Apart from this analysis of contemporary history, one would like to ask the editors as to how a book which they themselves castigate as fundamentally mistaken can perform this 'historic role' of discrediting the revolutionary claims of the communists?

Let us turn to the criticisms. Correctly pointing out that crucial to an understanding of the Latin-American situation 'is a painstaking analysis, from a Marxist point of view, of concrete social situations' the editors state 'Debray not only contributes nothing in this area, he does not even show an awareness of its importance'. They go on to criticise him for not concretely analysing the Cuban experience, for failing to study the failure in Peru which prior to Guevara tried to implement the famous *foco* theory, and for consistently ignoring the political aspects of Latin-American revolutionary struggles. They conclude, 'the greatest weakness of Debray's theory is not its specific errors and omissions, important as they are,

but its attempt to prescribe a course which all Latin-American revolutions must follow.'

Andre Gunder Frank and S. A. Shah rub home this devastating critique when they assail Debray's theses 'on two fundamental grounds': first, they do not derive from a fundamental *analysis* of Latin-American society, and still less of *class* structure; and second, in consequence, they divorce *theory* from practice, and, mistaking the nature of the Latin-American revolution, they underestimate the political role of military activity and mass participation, and their interrelationship. In the same essay, the two authors point to 'Debray's underestimation of the politics of revolution' and to the theoretical defects which lead him to 'underestimate the importance of political mass participation in the revolution'.

A Brazilian sociologist using the pen name of Clea Silva has even harsher truths to utter. On the basis of generalisation of recent revolutionary experience, his conclusions are: that Cuba cannot be repeated, above all, because imperialism will never let itself be caught by surprise again; that to command from a rural area is not necessarily essential in every case; that to be a revolutionary does not mean only working in the villages; that armed struggle is not the only struggle through which tempered cadres are produced. He further charges that Debray's most dangerous effort lies in 'attempting to destroy the basic principle that "without revolutionary theory there is no revolutionary movement" and to substitute for creative Marxism a theory of spontaneity'.

Finally, the writer is of the view that 'seeming profundity' of Debray's essays 'is apparent and illusory. In fact Debray collected information about the experiences many of the revolutionary movements had undergone, but he did not succeed in finding a true *explanation* of what occurred and what is occurring in Latin America because he did not begin by a socio-economic analysis of our continent, an analysis of its condition as a dependent capitalist economy.'

Two Cuban revolutionaries carry the battle against Debray's

erroneous viewpoint on to the homeground of the experience of the Cuban revolution itself. They point out that before Fidel Castro announced his determination to land in Cuba in 1956 the country was going through a profound crisis of traditional political parties and leaders. Additionally, in the Cuban countryside 'the political confrontations had already taken the form of direct clashes between the army and the peasantry'. They point out that besides Castro's forces there were other political forces like the Revolutionary Directorate and the PSP (the prerevolutionary communist party) which also played a role in the revolutionary process. 'The Cuban lesson as conceived by Debray is a sectarian lesson, and therefore a bad lesson which in no way can help the revolutionary organisations of the continent to solve the problems which have already arisen, problems of the unification of truly revolutionary forces.'

They lash out at Debray's counterposing work in the city to work in the countryside and especially his slander that those who work in the city are *ipso facto* bourgeois. They call this 'not only an insult but also stupid; but this stupidity is necessary as an argument for the theoretical construction erected by Debray'. They point out that the city 'was the place where the class contradictions became the sharpest; and if Debray, who claims to have studied the Cuban experience (he had ample time to do so), is unaware of this factor then one must say that he has not understood anything'.

As for the famous Debray thesis about the *foco* creating everything, the authors state 'in Cuba the guerrilla *foco* did not create the party, but rather a political organisation with very definite characteristics which distinguish it from the traditional Marxist parties, the July 26th movement, formed the guerrilla force. . . The movement takes the form of a broad-front organisation in which diverse classes and social groups take part, based on a democratic programme and having the immediate objective of overthrowing the dictatorship. . . we can penetrate Debray's "technicist" conception and find

behind it a political conception which has surely been discredited: spontaneity in organisational problems, to the criticism of which Lenin more than fifty years ago devoted his *What Is To Be Done?*'

The authors go on to argue that while the guerrilla movement is essential for the defeat of imperialism in Latin America 'yet immediately a series of differences with the Cuban process come to mind'. These include: Marxist ideology and struggle against reformism; long drawn out war involving political work among the peasantry; the continental scope of the revolution; creation of Marxist parties of a new type freed from the 'classic structure of Stalinist formalism'.

Yet another critic of Debray, Egbal Ahmed, makes a telling point. 'In places the coincidence of official American opinions with Debray's formulations is startling. When W. W. Rostow made his famous statement that the guerrilla force enjoyed considerable advantage over the government because "its task is merely to destroy while the government must build and protect", those who knew something about revolutionary warfare laughed at him. Debray, to my knowledge, is the first revolutionary writer to agree with Rostow, albeit inadvertently . . . Debray's *foco*, I am afraid, is a tailor's fit for the American counterinsurgency programme.'

Jane Petras goes a step further: 'Dynamic revolutionary leadership can only emerge through class struggle and vigorous discussions and cannot resemble the ultracentralised personality cult espoused by Debray. Debray's type of leader breeds a mood of dependence and intellectual sterility in a movement that usually disappears with the leader.'

'For Debray, who lacks a coherent theory of revolution, a handful of committed leaders can "set the big motor of masses"—a slight variation of the discredited old theory of an elite electrifying the masses through bold actions—an approach which has cost Latin-American revolutionaries dearly.'

'By reducing armed struggle to guerrilla struggle, by equating guerrillas with an uprooted and isolated elite, by focusing

almost exclusively on the military rather than the political aspects, Debray predetermines the outcome: defeat.'

One has quoted these different authors somewhat extensively because one is afraid that this critique of Debray by the very group which was lauding him to the skies is not going to receive the same blaze of publicity as *Revolution in Revolution*? It is good that some of our misdirected idealistic youth should be aware that this kind of devastating and basic criticism is being made. And made not by 'orthodox communists'—who made these criticisms quite some time ago—but by erstwhile Debray admirers. These critics still hope that an anticommunist revolutionary movement and leadership will be able to do the trick where Debray failed. Let us leave them to their futile exercises and cheap sneers. Our concern is not with those who feel the first fine careless rapture of revolutionary youth. Let their idealism not be led astray by the Debray myth, founded as it was on a supposedly basically new revolutionary theory. To these idealists the *Monthly Review*, November 1968, should prove of help.

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