
From Che to Marcos

The Changing Grassroots Left in Latin America

The guerrilla is the combat vanguard of the people . . . armed and willing to carry out a series of warlike actions for the one possible strategic end—the seizure of power.

Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (1961)

Questions and more questions fill up our nights . . . “Were these words the best ones to say what we wanted to say?” “Were they the right words at this time?” “Were they understandable?”

Subcomandante Marcos, *Shadows of Tender Fury* (1994)

Jeffrey W. Rubin

CHE GUEVARA spoke of small, dedicated bands that would seize power through guerrilla action, as did Fidel Castro. The location of power was in the capitalist economy and the state, which served the wealthy few, and these two needed to be overthrown by the working class. One of Guevara’s contributions was to put the peasantry into this equation, as well as to claim that guerrilla *focos*, or centers, rather than organized workers, could begin the struggle. The goals were to set up a new, collectivized, noncapitalist economy, to establish universal education and health care, and to create a “new man” in a new society. The model was Cuba, where the U.S.-supported dictator was overthrown, a new form of political authority established, and living conditions greatly improved.

Che is a revolutionary icon to this day. When the Brazilian newspaper *Zero Hora* reports that a mayor in the state of Rio Grande do Sul is a leader in the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST), the mayor is shown in his office with a photo of Che on the wall. Rural women in Rio Grande do Sul claim Che as well, evoking his vision of “new men and women” at their 2001 state assembly.

Subcomandante Marcos is the masked, non-Indian leader of the Zapatistas, a Mayan guerrilla army of sorts, one that converted it-

self very quickly into a nonviolent opposition engaged in national and international debate and negotiation. He is a postmodern spokesperson—joking, sly, literary, passionate, erotic, philosophical; speaking out, like Che, against exploitation and marginalization, and naming unfettered free trade and, implicitly, capitalism as the enemy.

But Marcos and the Zapatistas speak also for a new kind of democracy, a democracy that takes procedure and voting seriously, which Che’s *focos* and Castro’s Communist Party did not. Che and Castro emphasized the importance of a vanguard’s leading the *pueblo* to revolution, and then leading in the construction of a new society. Given this scenario, democracy didn’t matter, and political control and repression were permissible and necessary.

In contrast, in a language new for the radical left in Latin America, Marcos has defended a policy of alliances within a complex civil society, no longer broken down into Che’s bourgeois and working classes. Marcos also speaks about and with Indians—a category of people that barely existed, politically, for revolutionaries of Che’s era. Correspondingly, Marcos calls for a dual Indian-Mexican nation, based on concepts of citizenship and culture, with no revolution of the old sort, led by an armed vanguard, in sight. Citizenship and culture, like democracy, need to be thought about and developed, and, Marcos argues, in this process the left needs to engage with the reality of difference—in class and worldview and also in race and gender. Today in Brazil, it is the ico-

nography of Chiapas and Marcos that appears in the contemporary artwork of the Mercosul Biennial in Porto Alegre and in discussions at the World Social Forum (an alternative to the World Economic Forum) in the same Brazilian city. (Che, however, dominated the T-shirt market at the Social Forum.)

Although separated by three decades, Che and Marcos faced similar societies, characterized by vast inequality and deprivation: hunger, malnutrition, disease, illiteracy, and underemployment. Latin American countries are among the most unequal in the world, and they have remained so through the processes of industrialization and urbanization that characterized much of the twentieth century. In the face of turbulent political conflicts over inclusion and equality, both Che and Marcos operated with the broad notion that to be on the left means to oppose economic inequality and poverty and to reject political rule at the service of business or political elites.

However, although both Che and Marcos offer visions of exploitation and transformation, the futures they describe, and the means of getting there, differ markedly. How can we think about the path from Che to Marcos, from the 1960s to the 1990s, from clandestine guerrilla *focos* to the Zapatistas' National Democratic Convention—where, in front of the Mexican flag, they literally handed over the struggle from the *foco* to the representatives of civil society? And how should we evaluate the results of this transformation in leftist ideology and strategy?

AS SOMEONE who has lived in and written about Mexico (and, more recently, Brazil), I believe that the place to start thinking about the 1960s and all that came after is Mexico City in 1968, on the eve of the Olympic Games. I will begin there, at a quintessential 1968 moment of euphoria and possibility, and then look at what followed. I will trace the Mexican path from Che to Marcos and then recast my story in a broader Latin American framework—looking at the radical mobilizations of the 1960s, the establishment of military dictatorships, and the forms of leftist organizing that emerged under the dictatorships and developed and changed during the

more recent decades of democratization.

I will then compare the visions and strategies of the sixties and the nineties, asking what has been gained and what lost. Is the language of democracy, culture, and civil society a step forward, or was the dream of organizing the masses to overthrow the state and capitalism a better bet? Has Marcos trivialized revolution with his mask and his pipe, his humor and flirtations, his clever references to Radio Shack and the stars of Mexican telenovelas? Have the Zapatistas, along with many activist groups elsewhere in Latin America, erred dramatically in thinking that through alliance with something called civil society, or through changes in something called culture, a system of power can be transformed?

The Mexico City Student Movement

Like its counterparts elsewhere, the student movement in Mexico City created new forms of activism that shaped the lives of a generation and have influenced society to the present day. The movement began in city high schools around issues of police intervention. It spread to high schools and universities across the nation, as a campaign against the violence of the police forces known as *granaderos*, the laws supporting this violence, the taking of political prisoners, and the structure of political authority generally.

Nineteen-sixty-eight in Mexico City was a time of expansiveness and the breaking down of barriers—a time for forging alliances among students, workers, and the marginal urban poor and challenging the political regime. Later on came the questioning of middle-class conventions, of the official history, and of the established artistic and literary culture. It was a time of great hope, seemingly on the verge of transformation. Students were out in the streets, in the plazas, on the buses, forming brigades, “going to the people.” There were movement committees at each school and heady experiences of argument, exploration, and democratic practice. There was no central leader. Families were drawn in, whole apartment buildings and neighborhoods. A revolution was happening—not Che’s revolution—but a revolution from within the system, nonviolent, driven by euphoria, conviction, and the excitement of ex-

perimentation on the ground.

The ferment in Mexico City culminated in a massacre—one of the defining moments of political repression in twentieth-century Latin America—at a demonstration in the Plaza of the Three Cultures at Tlatelolco. The plaza is closed off on three sides by buildings. The army closed off the fourth side and came in shooting, on the ground and with helicopters, killing at least three hundred people and arresting more than a thousand. Families had to search the streets, hospitals, and prisons to find their children.

The massacre at Tlatelolco had an enormous impact; it was the moment that revealed the regime for what it was, a government shooting at its own people. This sort of state violence was particularly significant in Mexico, which had experienced a revolution in the 1910s and dramatic progressive reforms in the 1930s, and still had a government that claimed to rule in the interests of all its people. Ever since, the legitimacy of the Mexican government has been in question.

What Happened to Student Activism?

The violence of Tlatelolco and the arrests that followed destroyed the mass student movement and its open, democratic politics. Now activists from Mexico City went to the provinces to make the revolution in a different fashion. They became a clandestine left, very close to the commitments and visions of Che, working through small revolutionary *focos*, mostly nonviolently, to organize peasants, workers, and city dwellers more generally into a radical movement.

The old activism also took on popular cultural forms and was expressed, for example, in rock and roll, which had its own earlier history. Rock in Mexico was seen at first (in the 1950s) as a threat to respectable mores, but it was domesticated, with Spanish lyrics and muted content, in the early 1960s. After Tlatelolco, it took a countercultural turn, labeled *la onda chicana*, the Chicano wave, and attracted the *jippies*. This music represented simultaneously a withdrawal from the public political sphere and a challenge to Mexican society. It is interesting to compare the Chicano wave to the Chicano movement that burgeoned

in the United States at the same time. The U.S. movement represented a militant narrowing and sharpening of identity; it gained political strength by rejecting a mainstream American identity and claiming a Mexican core, sometimes labeled Aztlán. The Mexican *onda chicana*, in contrast, rejected conventional Mexican nationalism—the Mexican core—to develop a *Mexican* rock and roll in English, with the innovators often being from the north of Mexico who brought musical and cultural influences from across the border.

The *onda Chicana* culminated in a massive rock festival—the Mexican Woodstock—in Avándaro. Again, this collective action, “cultural,” not “political,” brought a repressive response: the Mexican government confiscated the film of the festival, literally erasing it from history; banned rock concerts; and prohibited radio stations from playing rock music. Interestingly, the Mexican government went on to encourage middle-class student listeners to turn to *nuevo canto*, a melodic folk music with a different sort of radical content that expressed solidarity with the struggle of the Latin American masses, but without the rock edge.

Where did rock go? Eventually, it went to a different, lower class, urban, disruptive set of locations and forms, to performances and performance spaces deep in the barrios and shantytowns. It became a music and an idiom seen by many today as both subversive and democratic.

AS THE MEMBERS of the sixties generation got older, many of the ex-radical activists and the rock and rollers turned into *nuevo canto* folks. They moved into adult society, inside and outside the government—from schoolteachers, artists, and heads of state welfare programs to Zapatista advisers and government negotiators with the Zapatistas. (This happened not only in Mexico, but all over Latin America.) The most optimistic observers see connections, webs, networks of activists and sympathizers who speak both the language of the Mexican regime *and* the language of dissent and social justice. Perhaps, this generational shift explains the calls for electoral democracy in the 1990s, as well as the massive public willingness to see the cause of the

Zapatistas as just. Perhaps, also, it explains the election of Vicente Fox as president and his appointment of moderates and leftists to negotiate with the Zapatistas in Chiapas—and with the United States, too.

All along, though, there has been a radical, clandestine, Che-inspired activism in the provinces, in rural and urban locations: land takeovers and powerful squatter settlements in Monterrey, called *Tierra y Libertad* (Land and Liberty); an urban popular movement in Durango that organized neighborhood by neighborhood; *campesino* mobilizations in the northern Yaqui and Mayo valleys that led to successful collective agricultural enterprises; and a peasant-worker coalition in the southern Mexican city of Juchitán, where Zapotec Indians revitalized their culture, fought to hold onto their land, and won municipal elections. This activism was strong and impassioned, and it eventually became public and threatening; revolution, many thought, was on its way. In Juchitán, for example, the Coalition of Workers, Peasants, and Students of the Isthmus (COCEI) was Zapotec, militant, and militantly separate from what would come to be called Mexican civil society. COCEI's political ideology was a blend of Che, Marxism, and fierce attachment to Zapotec culture. All these 1970s movements were inspired—and most of them actively organized—by the clandestine left that came out of 1968. And they in turn spawned a new generation of radical movements in the 1980s: independent labor unions, a democratic teachers' movement, and a new phenomenon called *coordinadoras*—the coordinating committees of radical peasant movements or urban neighborhood organizations.

THE RESULT was a transformation in what was possible politically in Mexico. Massive public battles in the 1970s and small, discernible regional and sectoral shifts in power relations in the 1980s culminated in President Carlos Salinas's recognition of and readiness to negotiate with opposition popular movements in 1988. This was a new moment in twentieth-century Mexico, where the government had always demanded that oppositional groups forgo their independence and become part of the ruling party if they wanted

to gain some of their demands.

In a turn that has gotten particular attention, a group of activists from the north went to Chiapas in the early 1980s, at the invitation of the archbishop of San Cristóbal, Samuel Ruiz. Ruiz had come to Chiapas as a relatively apolitical, conservative churchman. Traveling across the state and seeing the abysmal living conditions of the Mayan Indians who made up the majority of its population led him to organize an Indigenous Congress in 1974. He went on to help the Mayans explore and build on their Indian identities and to challenge the poverty that made them the most marginal of the Mexican poor. Ruiz became an adherent of liberation theology, and he welcomed political organizing by outside activists. He met members of the clandestine left, from groups like *Línea Proletaria* and *Política Popular*, and invited them to come to Chiapas—a move that eventually resulted in the armed Zapatistas.

What we see today in Chiapas is a product of the coming together of those leftist activists, the radical bishop and his organizational legacy, and Indian communities and cultures in the Lacandón jungle. The Zapatistas began in part from Che, seizing world attention as an armed guerrilla band. They borrowed significantly from the militant and vanguardist Zapotec Indian movement COCEI in Juchitán, placing culture at the heart of politics. Despite these similarities, however, the extraordinarily complex and rich history of political discussion and organizing in Chiapas from the 1970s to the 1990s produced something genuinely original, a new leftist language and vision. This includes negotiation about what it means to be Indian within a larger Mexican nation. It includes discussion about new forms of democracy and an inventiveness regarding civil society—exemplified by the convention in the jungle; by the Zapatistas' national *consulta*, in which they asked people around the nation to comment and vote; by Marcos's communiqués; and by the accords on Indian autonomy hammered out with government negotiators in 1996 (though never implemented in that form). The new leftist vision also includes a communication and public debate deeply rooted in popular cultural idioms—indeed, in the language of rock and roll and its progeny.

The Left in Latin America

This brings us again to the path from the 1960s to the present, from Che to Marcos. I've suggested that the euphoric and unprecedented mobilizations of the 1960s in Mexico spawned a generational shift in public consciousness, a more critical and subversive rock and roll, and a network of clandestine and then public grassroots movements. These ingredients together produced a new kind of radical project in Chiapas. A broadly similar shift can be seen in the rest of Latin America. Despite the success of armed revolution in Cuba and admiration for Cuba across the Latin American left, leftist politics from the 1950s to the early 1970s worked through electoral systems with some degree of democratic credibility or through grassroots movements that sought reform—as in Mexico before 1968. Challenges from the left sometimes brought great turbulence; many leftists lived at the border of legality and violence. But with the exception of a handful of guerrilla movements—in Venezuela, Colombia, and southern Mexico—opposition politics engaged directly with existing institutions. Indeed, between the 1950s and 1970s, public, legal competition over basic issues of labor, land, and economic development characterized much of Latin American politics.

Brazil was a paradigmatic case of urban and rural mobilization during these decades, with agrarian leagues claiming land and labor rights and electorates voting for progressive change. In Argentina and Chile as well, there was a ferment of democratic activism—which led, in a non-Guevarist mode, to challenges to state power, not through *focos*, but through public movements that mixed militancy and revolutionary Marxism with strong appeals for reform. In this somewhat democratic mid-century moment—democratic in the sense of formal political systems and increasing public voice—there was a clear move to the left among many voters. Communists and radicals of other stripes agreed that the time was not right for *focos* and violence. However, as democratic reformism was met with governmental repression, the left focused increasingly on armed guerrilla action, reanimating the legend of Che.

Brazil's move to the left was curtailed by military intervention in 1964. The coup, which

was directly supported by the United States, provided a model for the military governments that came to predominate in most of the continent within a decade. With some variation in each case, this involved the closing down or strict control of Congress, the banning or manipulation of political parties, the imprisonment of opposition leaders, and the arrest of anyone associated with anyone suspected of holding radical views or opposing the military regimes. The years from the Brazilian coup in 1964 until the Chilean transition to democracy in 1989 were a time of torture and disappearances.

AS A RESULT of this repression, the language of guerrilla or revolutionary takeover of the state played an increasing role in oppositional discourse. Inspired by Cuba and Che, armed, militant, Marxist, materialist struggle became one of the prominent forms of activism in Latin America. The Sandinista Revolution in 1979 in Nicaragua was a kind of culmination, updating the Cuban model, adopting its one-party political structure, its large development projects, and its state-run agrarian reform, but also innovating in the face of popular resistance. Had it not been opposed by violent U.S. intervention, the Sandinista government might have found a path to greater socio-economic equality and more responsive political representation in Central America—an alternative path from Che to Marcos.

But something else happened in the course of opposition to the dictatorships, something that parallels what occurred in Chiapas between the Mayans and the urban radicals. Throughout Latin America, new kinds of social movements addressed a broad range of issues, intertwined with but not limited to economic concerns, in increasingly democratic fashion. These emerged out of and alongside the Marxist, Che-inspired movements, much as the Zapatistas did. But, also like the Zapatistas, they engaged with the conditions of daily life, with popular culture, and even with academic political theorizing in new ways, beginning to focus on questions of culture, citizenship, and civil society.

This change involved a conceptual shift re-

garding the nature of power. One source of the shift was feminist theory and activism, which spread throughout Latin America, reaching rural and urban women, influencing activists and academics, and generating networks of interconnection nationally and globally. The transitions to democracy and the openings they appeared to offer were another source. Brazilian political scientist Evelina Dagnino attributes the conceptual change as well to the engagement of leftist intellectuals and activists with the work of Antonio Gramsci, which guided them to a serious consideration of the political significance of culture. This shift in conceptualizations of power, democracy, and opposition is typified and brought into sharp relief by the Zapatistas, but it is shared in different degrees by the Pan-Mayan movement in Guatemala, which focuses on the revitalization of Mayan history, language, and culture; by the Organization of Black Communities of the Pacific Coast of Colombia, which challenges development projects with alternative approaches to both race and biodiversity; and by the Participatory Budgeting Project in Porto Alegre, the Movement of Rural Women Workers in Rio Grande do Sul, and the Afro-Reggae Cultural Group in Rio de Janeiro. Each of these Brazilian groups seeks social change through innovative cultural and political pathways: re-designing institutional arrangements for budget allocation; linking land struggles with gender concerns and democratic organizational practices; or fighting violence and racism by training musicians and filling the streets of urban shantytowns with music.

Evaluating Social Movements

From the perspective of these recent movements, the Che-inspired radicalism of the previous left was a mistake. It produced terrible repression on the part of military governments. Activists put too much faith in the possibility of transformation and scarcely imagined the horrific brutality of these regimes. The newer movements are more sensitive to the enduring weight of the obstacles they face, in the form of state and army power and the ability of economic elites to summon up this power.

Even more significantly, Che-inspired radicalism placed too little value on democratic

forms and substance and lacked important kinds of cultural awareness. In contrast, the more recent varieties of leftist organizing exhibit, in varied and uneven ways, greater concern for democratic procedures, for cultural meaning, for multiple dimensions of power, and for gender, race, violence, and sexuality—along with different ways of relating all these concerns to material issues.

On the less economic end of the “new” spectrum, the leaders of the Afro-Reggae Cultural Group teach young children and teenagers in Rio de Janeiro’s most violent and drug-ridden favelas to play the drums. The group employs a language of culture and diversity similar to that of Marcos and postmodern theorists. With this language, Afro-Reggae secures grants from international foundations and has obtained government and private sector funds to open a music school and build a community center. In addition, it has expanded rapidly, running a young people’s theater group, a circus training program, a senior citizens’ chorus, and a spin-off band whose young members drum on tin cans. Acting through culture, and largely accepting the economic status quo, Afro-Reggae activists change the lives of individuals in the poor and marginal *favelas* in which they work, and they explicitly take on issues of racism and violence. Their leaders know that the media and foundations like them because their program appears unthreatening, and they use that to negotiate—for funds, for schools, for the ear of the mayor, the governor, and the drug traffickers—but not to create a black movement linked to electoral activity or to change the economic system.

In contrast to Afro-Reggae’s focus on culture, Marcos’s early communiqués and interviews suggest a more multidimensional approach, with their intertwined emphasis on the Chiapas economy, Mayan culture, and new imaginings of democratic politics. Here is a great hope for the left and for Latin America—a multifaceted radical politics that speaks for democracy *and* economic well-being *and* recognizes the cultural dimensions of people’s lives.

The Participatory Budgeting Project in Porto Alegre similarly combines concern for economic issues with internal democracy and

rootedness in neighborhood cultures. Since winning elections in 1988, the Workers Party in Porto Alegre has created and implemented a process by which people in neighborhoods decide exactly how to allocate the municipal service budget, down to whether to pave streets (and which streets) or build child care centers. As a result, through half-year cycles of community and regional meetings, large numbers of households in Porto Alegre have gotten sewage, and whole neighborhoods have literally been opened up to the city, so that buses, ambulances, and delivery trucks can get in and out. In addition, the participatory budgeting experience invites revisions of democratic theory, arguing that in order to institute democratic policymaking and accountability, elected legislatures must sometimes be circumvented by unpaid, elected neighborhood councils. Participatory Budgeting thus combines an economic focus with Marcos's call for democratic innovation.

The trajectory of the Movement of Rural Women Workers (MMTR) in Rio Grande do Sul illustrates the potential and the difficulty of maintaining the new, Marcos-like political forms. In the 1990s, poor rural women withdrew from leading agricultural movements to form their own movement, which addressed economic and gender concerns simultaneously, delicately balancing the two. This resulted in a politics that could envision distinct identities and strategies within a single movement, in Marcos-like fashion. In the past two years, though, the MMTR has shifted back to a more Che-like framework. At the MMTR state assembly last November, a talk that promised a gender perspective argued that U.S. imperialism, via Monsanto's genetically altered crops, was killing the children of rural workers. The subtlety and multiplicity of the mid-1990s language of gender was replaced by a simplistic materialist analysis and an emphasis on unified working class *luta*, or struggle. This was accompanied by a concern for nature and "pure seeds" that was entirely compatible with traditional women's roles. In response to this shift away from more nuanced economic and gender analysis, some local women's groups have distanced themselves from the class-based *luta* to continue pursuing multidimensional strate-

gies in their municipalities.

WHAT CAN WE learn from these Brazilian movements about the possibilities of left activism? The panorama of activism in Latin America shows a marked shift from Che to Marcos, one that can be seen today in the panoply of movements and NGOs seeking not to overthrow the state, unionize workers, or transform economies, but rather to create cultural change, foster democratic citizenship, fight racism and gender inequality, and strengthen civil societies. In their attention to culture and democracy, these newer, Marcos-type forms of activism represent the best hope for a moral and humane politics of transformation. But can they be successful?

At times, these Marcos-type movements focus exclusively on issues of culture and civil society, as with Afro-Reggae. It may be that such cultural efforts will in the long run produce both large networks and new groups of citizens, which together will promote reform through democratic politics. This is the conviction of many progressive nongovernmental organizations and civil-society activists in Mexico and Brazil. Or it may be that the Marcos-type groups will need to grapple more directly with economic issues and with the need for mass-based mobilization, and, that as they do so, the resulting innovations, rooted in concerns for democracy and culture, will produce unprecedented successes. This is the conviction and practice of movements such as Participatory Budgeting, the Zapatistas, and the more gender-focused groups within the Brazilian rural women's movement.

Alongside these Marcos-type "new" movements, the more Che-inspired model continues to claim some of the largest visible challenges to state power in Latin America. Employing hierarchical authority structures to build mass movements focused on economic issues, these movements raise compelling normative and empirical questions. The Colombian guerrillas, for example, have for several decades controlled large expanses of territory, kept out the state, and established cohesive communities for rural Colombians to whom the dignity and material benefits of national

citizenship have long been denied. At the same time, the guerrillas' political analysis has remained stagnant since the 1960s. Their organization is strictly hierarchical, and in recent years they have engaged increasingly in the kidnapping and murder of civilians.

In a compelling contemporary example of the Che-like position, the nonviolent Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST) in Brazil, with squatter settlements across the country, constitutes the single biggest public challenge to the neoliberal economic vision of the Brazilian government. The MST has created new forms of political protest and collective agriculture, and it has transformed Brazilians' beliefs about agrarian reform and social justice. This past March, in a highly symbolic act, the MST invaded the *fazenda* of the family of Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, bringing the issue of property relations to the forefront of Brazilian politics. MST leaders insist that their success results from their ability to mobilize with great efficiency; centralization and discipline are essential for combating a repressive rural power structure. Thus, the MST eschews internal democracy, imposes a single squatter and cooperative model on vastly different groups of rural supporters, rejects alliances with less radical rural movements, and for the most part marginalizes women and reproduces conventional racial hierarchies.

In a similar fashion, the Zapotec movement in Mexico, COCEI, has combined pathbreaking strategies of cultural elaboration and participation in Mexican elections with a marked lack of concern for democratic practices within the movement. Still, these Che-inspired movements are not uniformly undemocratic. Rather, they contain mixtures of voice and non-voice, accountability and non-accountability, and electoral and non-electoral activity—mixtures that change over time and vary from movement to movement.

Which forms of activism—those inspired by Che or by Marcos—can succeed in promoting significant changes in the vast inequalities, exclusions, and miseries that characterize Latin America? And how are people who value democracy to respond to these possibilities? This issue lies at the heart of social movement activism in Latin America today. Many who value

democracy and cultural diversity as overriding principles believe that the newer, Marcos-like approach is a better one, more likely to succeed, more gradual, more humane, more cognizant of the multifacetedness of people's lives. However, others argue that the Marcos path won't result in significant change. It focuses too much on identity and civil society and too little on economics and mass mobilization. The Che-inspired ideal of class analysis, *focos*, and mass unity is better, stronger somehow, and necessary in the face of the forces of economic globalization. Indeed, one could imagine a shift back, sometime in the future, by a new generation of activists, to the older, more Guevarist forms of political action, which might in turn prove more capable of challenging forms of domination in effective ways. But at what democratic and cultural cost?

THOSE COMMITTED to democracy, participation, and dissent may choose to oppose nondemocratic movements despite, or even because of, their potential effectiveness—because of the internal harms wrought by vanguardism in people's daily lives and the immeasurably greater harms that occur when such non-democratic practices shape the policies of leftist regimes. An alternative approach is to balance support and critique of Che-like activism, pressing for more attention to internal democracy and new approaches to culture. In either case, it is essential for those who believe in democracy to identify, not cover up, the non-democratic and in some cases violent practices of vanguardist social movements. This requires an ongoing critique—and active support for forces within and outside the movements who undertake such critiques. It means examining the changing mix of democracy and non-democracy in hierarchical movements and speaking for democratic alternatives.

This is indeed what many democratic Latin American activists and intellectuals are doing. Some offer degrees of support to vanguardist, hierarchical movements such as the MST in Brazil and the Zapotec COCEI in Mexico because these movements exist and make headway. To oppose them would limit or squelch the possibilities they represent. (Before the 1990s,

when the Colombian guerrillas were less involved in drug trafficking and violence against civilians and suffered from paramilitary violence themselves, they too fell into this category.) Others support vanguardist, hierarchical movements because they value the strength of these movements, with their capacities to mobilize, to act with speed and efficiency, and to threaten. Such movements challenge powerful elites and governments against great odds, and they can be valuable components of multifaceted activism. They may make reform more likely in democratic arenas and through Marcos-like movements, because of pressures they generate.

Practical and critical support for nondemocratic movements should not, however, eclipse the hope of the Marcos vision or the importance of directing resources, commitment, and creativity in this direction. Much of the experimentation on the Latin American left over the last twenty years has been about creating new kinds of broad-based democratic movements. These are movements that strive to maintain the separateness of different groups, democratically develop and articulate common goals, and bring together diverse networks for coordinated action.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S.-Mexican border separated a militant political move-

ment that promoted a single Chicano identity north of the border from a fluid and creative musical movement to the south. Within Mexico, too, radical political activism developed separately from cultural innovation. The experience of the Zapatistas erased this border between culture and politics. A Zapatista-like vision for a new social movement politics might mean a Chicano movement that practiced the hybridity of the rock and roll *onda chicana*—a movement that combined broad claims about class and discrimination with frank acknowledgments of cultural diversity, and combined *that* with the musical innovation of Afro-Reggae and the internal democracy of Participatory Budgeting. Put another way, perhaps big claims against discernible power can coexist, even if uneasily, with practices of internal democracy and recognition of difference. This is the most important lesson of the Mexican and Latin American path from Che to Marcos. ●

JEFFREY W. RUBIN is professor of history and research associate at the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture at Boston University. He is currently in Brazil doing research on democracy and grassroots innovation with a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Democratic Socialists of America

Members of the Democratic Socialists of America work in immediate struggles for justice—as we build a movement for long-term social change.

We bring to our work a strategy for building alliances among social movements and a vision of a more just and equitable society.

Join DSA and become a card-carrying member of the largest and most exciting democratic socialist organization in the U.S.!

Send me more information about DSA.

Enclosed are my dues!

\$50 sustainer \$35 regular

\$15 low-income/student

Enclosed is a contribution of \$ ____ to help DSA's activism.

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Phone _____

DSA on the World Wide Web: <http://www.dsausa.org> (e-mail: dsa@dsausa.org)

Return to DSA, 180 Varick Street, New York, NY 10014 212/727-8610