

reinforcement of the Zionist project in the Holy Land, even among Jewish organisations such as the American Jewish Committee and the JDC that had long resisted Zionism and considered Sosúa and other settlements alternative models; and how the decline of such funding led unintentionally to the self-reliant success of those settlers who remained in the Dominican Republic after the war and led to a successful employee-owned dairy cooperative.

The reader will find in this excellent book rich hindsight on these and other unintended workings of human action as well as ample documentation to follow the complexities of this historical experiment of Jewish refugees escaping Europe and forced to recreate their lives in the tropics.

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Helen Yaffe, *Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. xiii + 354, £17.99, pb.

When people hear the name Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, they invariably think of an almost mythical, today even iconic, guerrilla leader. In contrast, few are aware of his contributions to the debate about the future of socialism, or his footprints as minister in Revolutionary Cuba. It is quite symptomatic that Steven Soderbergh’s films about Che deal exclusively with his role as a guerrilla leader in the overthrow of the Batista dictatorship (1956–8), and (in the second film) with his subsequent role as leader of the guerrilla struggle in Bolivia (1966–7). Not a film sequence can be found about Che’s role in framing the strategies and policies of Revolutionary Cuba (1959–65); nor do recent biographies of Che give much attention to this side of his story.⁸

However, several books (also in English) have been published in which Che Guevara is specifically recognised for his thoughts on economics and economic planning, and as a socialist visionary.⁹ Helen Yaffe’s book *Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution* is a valuable complement to these studies. The book is an exciting, well-written and well-documented narrative and analysis of Che’s economic thought, based on years of research with primary (interviews and unpublished files) and secondary sources.

The book deals at length with Che’s role in the so-called Great Debate in Cuba (1963–5) – in fact, it leaves one with the impression that there might not have been a debate at all had it not been for Che’s strong positions on a number of issues. What is a little strange, however, is that in the Cuban debate there was practically no mention at all of similar debates in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, which could have served as challenging points of departure. This is, of course, not Yaffe’s fault, but it is interesting in retrospect to draw some parallels.

Nikolai Bukharin, one of the leading Bolsheviks at the time, wrote his reflections on the transition to communism in 1920, just after ‘war communism’ had been a

⁸ Jon Lee Anderson, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* (London, 1997); Paco Ignacio Taibo II, *Guevara, also known as Che* (New York, 1997).

⁹ Bertram Silverman (ed.), *Man and Socialism in Cuba: The Great Debate* (New York, 1971); Michael Löwy, *The Marxism of Che Guevara* (New York, 1973); Dave Deutschmann (ed.), *Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution: Writings and Speeches of Ernesto Che Guevara* (Sydney, 1987); Carlos Tablada, *Che Guevara: Economics and Politics in the Transition to Socialism* (Sydney, 1989).

reality during the Russian civil war. Cash money had virtually ceased to circulate and massive nationalisations of industry had taken place, accompanied by forced deliveries of grains to the state by the peasantry – so, Bukharin argued, why not install ‘communism’ right away? There are many similarities between the situation in Russia at the time of Bukharin’s writings on the transition to communism and the situation in Cuba at the time of the Great Debate. Ironically, Bukharin changed position quite rapidly (and indeed drastically), and in the aftermath of the installation of the New Economic Policy, which restored capitalist modes of production in agriculture and denationalisation of industry, he became the leader of the ‘opposition from the right’ in the Great Industrialisation Debate in the Soviet Union (1924–8).¹⁰

In Cuba, Che Guevara had in October 1959 been appointed head of the new Department of Industrialisation set up within the National Institute for Agrarian Reform, and soon afterwards he was also asked to become president of the National Bank of Cuba. In the autumn of 1960 a wave of nationalisations took place, and in February 1961 Che became the first minister of industry, with a series of nationalised industries under his responsibility. It is in this context that the Great Debate evolved in Cuba. In this debate, eloquently described and analysed by Yaffe, positions emerged similar to those seen in the Great Industrialisation Debate in the Soviet Union in the 1920s.

There were those who sided with Che, arguing that the law of value should gradually lose importance, especially with respect to transactions between state enterprises. In Che’s view, Cuba could be run like a big enterprise, similar to giant US corporations, with the difference that Cuba would be a socialist corporation. This strategy should be supported by the Plan, measured and monitored in physical units, not market values. As in Cuba there had also been those in the Great Industrialisation Debate in the Soviet Union (‘the opposition from the left’ – Preobrazhensky and others) who argued that nationalised industries should be the core of industrialisation and that the law of value should cease to exist in transactions between them. In Cuba, Che’s proposal was to set up a budgetary financing system (BFS) where money transactions between state enterprises would gradually disappear. This was opposed to the auto-financing system (AFS) as applied in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe at the time. Both the BFS and AFS had their supporters, and while the BFS was applied within the Ministry of Industry, the AFS was applied in agriculture and other sectors of the economy. Ironically, while the BFS was being introduced in Cuba, another debate raged in the Soviet Union (the so-called Liberman debates) where the issue was the steadily less productive AFS (the BFS had been abandoned already in the 1920s), pointing at a systemic failure and portending the final collapse of the Soviet Union 25 years later.

One of Che’s most important legacies is his reflection on the need for Cuba to catch up in science and technology if it is to advance economically and socially. Che was one of the pioneers in stressing the role of education as a *sine qua non* for growth and development. Putting action behind words, Che Guevara was instrumental in setting up nine research centres, including biotechnology (‘green medicine’), nickel processing, oil exploration, chemical industry and, not least, by-products from sugar production. Many of these research facilities are

¹⁰ Nikolai Bukharin, *The Politics and Economics of the Transition Period* (London, 1979 [1920]); Alexander Ehrlich, *The Soviet Industrialisation Debate, 1924–1928* (Boston, 1960).

centres of excellence today – Cuba’s biotech sector in particular is world class in many areas.

Although Che’s economic ideas have always been respected in Cuba, this has been more in theory than in practice, and Cubans often argue that conditions were not ripe for their implementation in the early years of the Revolution. In another essay, however, Yaffe characterises ‘the Cuban Revolution as a pendulum swinging between what is desirable and what is necessary, with Guevara’s ideas being associated with the vitality of the revolution’.¹¹

Helen Yaffe’s book gives a balanced and insightful account of Che’s many official contributions to socialist economic thought: as a critique of the Soviet model; as trying to set an example himself, emphasising the importance of personal sacrifice for the sake of the collective; as a visionary of a new type of socialism. But these accounts are also present in the other studies of Che mentioned above. What is unique about Yaffe’s book is her impressive use of new, until now unexplored, Cuban sources: archival material including manuals, annual reports, factory inspection reports, transcripts of the internal meetings at the Ministry of Industry, led by Guevara, and last but not least, interviews with nearly 50 of Che’s closest collaborators. In this sense, it is safe to suggest that Helen Yaffe’s book is to date the most complete account of the economic thought of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara.

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Gina A. Ulysse, *Downtown Ladies: Informal Commercial Importers, a Haitian Anthropologist, and Self-Making in Jamaica* (Chicago IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. xvi + 333, £11.50; \$22.00, pb.

Informal commercial importers (ICIs) are sophisticated Jamaican ‘higglers’, or market women, who deal almost exclusively in clothing, shoes and electrical goods, imported from the Caribbean or circum-Caribbean region. Gina Ulysse adds greatly to what is known about the ICIs and their trade, showing that they have developed and responded to the more open Kingston economy since structural adjustment in the 1980s, though they have their roots among the sellers of slave produce in the internal markets of Jamaica in the eighteenth century.

Ulysse’s ICIs are by no means homogeneous in class terms, however. Although the majority are black and of lower-class origin, some of the more successful ones eventually break into the lower middle class and purchase suburban homes. Furthermore, some women members of the brown middle class also import goods for sale, but specialise in easily portable, high-value-to-weight commodities such as jewellery, alcohol, perfume and electronic items, which they carry into Jamaica themselves (as invisible traders) and retail from home to friends and acquaintances.

Much of Ulysse’s fieldwork was carried out in the Parnell Charles Arcade, a government-provided market in downtown Kingston, the colonial core of the capital city ‘that has been historically marginalised and is ruled by a class-specific

¹¹ Helen Yaffe, ‘Che Guevara’s Enduring Legacy: Not the Foco but the Theory of Socialist Construction’, *Latin American Perspectives*, issue 165, vol. 36, no. 2 (March 2009).