

How ambivalent we seem to be about revolution! ‘When you talk about destruction, don’t you know that you can count me out,’ John Lennon sang in 1968 – then added ‘in’. When William Blake saw the French Revolution as a ‘tyger’, he visualised it as a creature both of beauty and of horror.

For the last 50 years, the icon of revolution *par excellence* has been the Argentinian doctor-turned-guerrilla Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara. And, in the North at least, he, too, is curiously ambiguous.

Today, commentators on the right are quick to denounce him as a ruthless man of violence, an admirer and imitator first of Stalin, then of Mao. Others on the left, keen to establish their clear-eyed worldly wisdom, say much the same. Didn’t Che himself assert: ‘To send men to the firing squad, judicial proof is unnecessary’? Did he not do so, many times? And didn’t he state: ‘A revolutionary must become a cold killing-machine, motivated by pure hate’?

But, then again, he also said: ‘The true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love’ – and Nelson Mandela, no less, has called him ‘an inspiration for every human being who loves freedom’.

Even the photograph that helped to turn him into an icon, snapped by Alberto Korda on a day of mourning in 1960, is enigmatic. Korda said he saw in Che’s expression at that moment anger and pain and ‘absolute implacability’. Others have seen it as the face of a dreamer, full of desire and determination, courage and generosity. Even the Communist star on Che’s beret looks like a bird in flight.

The huge charisma in that picture was no trick of the lens. The British journalist

Richard Gott, who met Che several times, likened his ‘magnetic physical attraction’ to ‘the aura of a rock star’. An Indian diplomat who queued to shake his hand in Algiers recalled four decades later: ‘It was like getting an autograph of a celebrity.’

Today, we take it as read that nothing that glitters is actually gold, but Che was



No 109: Che Guevara

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not just guns and glamour. Jean-Paul Sartre, who knew him well, declared him ‘the most complete human being of the age’, its ‘most perfect man’, who ‘lived his words’ and ‘spoke his own actions’.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that in the popular imagination Jesus often looks like Che. When *Time* named *el Comandante* one of the hundred most influential people of the 20th century, it asked the Chilean-

American writer Ariel Dorfman to assess him. Che was, he wrote, a ‘secular saint ready to die because he could not tolerate a world where *los pobres de la tierra* [were] eternally relegated to [the] margins’.

And barely *had* he died – summarily executed in Bolivia in 1967 – than his remarkable resurrection began. While the poor in Latin America cried ‘Che lives!’, the affluent world he had regarded as the very enemy of humanity – capitalist, neo-colonialist, imperialist – discovered him as an emblem of radical chic.

Today, Che Guevara is a global brand, and Korda’s image of ‘*guerrillero heroico*’ – likewise much manipulated – is its logo, worn by anyone who wants to be seen as rebellious or ‘countercultural’. According to the curator of a recent exhibition on that image, it is now ‘out of control. It has become a corporation, an empire.’ Tens of millions around the world have bought the T-shirt, poster, baseball cap or mug and ‘made the statement’. Very few of them have ‘lived his words’ – or wanted to. Their kinds of ‘liberation’ were not the one Che worked and killed and died for.

Even more extraordinary has been the commandeering of his image by the forces of anything-but-Marxist materialism, from Swatch to Smirnoff, to stamp as somehow ‘cool’ and ‘radical’ the crap of consumerism. Korda himself, who had made his photo copyright-free, sued when it was used in an ad campaign for vodka. The ascetic Che, he insisted, never drank.

How fraudulent our culture is! For Che’s integrity, at least, we can admire him, whether we see the tyger as a thing of beauty or of horror. However we read that face, he wasn’t faking it. □