

# **Che Guevara: The Embodiment of the New Man**

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12 May 2011  
Goizueta Foundation Fellowship  
University of Miami-Cuban Heritage Collection

## **Foreword**

When I first heard of the Goizueta Foundation Undergraduate Research Fellowship during a visit to the Cuban Heritage Collection, I knew that without this experience my college education would be almost incomplete. Undergraduates spend countless hours reading secondary sources written by noted historical scholars, studying for exams, and conducting research for their own term papers. The Goizueta Fellowship gave me the experience of working with a historical archive to explore my interest in Che Guevara more deeply than most students are able. The sheer volume of materials, at times, was daunting. With the help of faculty, I narrowed my focus to a more manageable scope. The tangible product of my semester follows this foreword, but the invaluable experience of learning the research process is most certainly the most important product of my semester as a Goizueta Fellow. To include as many interesting sources as possible, I only summarize the need for the New Man. This allows me to focus more on the portrayal of the New Man through Guevara, its main vehicle. I look forward to continuing my research in the form of an honors thesis in History, where another six months of research and writing will help me further explore the complex relationship between Che and the Cuban people. Many thanks to:

**Dr. Eduardo Elena**

**Maria Estorino**

**The Goizueta Foundation**

**Rosa Monzón-Álvarez**

**Dr. Kate Ramsey**

**And the countless others who aided in this project.**

## **Che Guevara: The Embodiment of the New Man**

At first glance, it seems odd that a Cuban nationalist revolution selected an Argentine as its ideal New Man. However, Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara’s depiction provided the example of what the revolution required of each person in order to succeed. The Revolutionary Government stressed the importance of education<sup>1</sup> and Cuban nationalism,<sup>2</sup> using Che’s image and actions as an aid. Similarly, the stories of Che during the Cuban Revolution served as examples of the heroic selflessness that the New Man required.<sup>3</sup> In Cuba, Che found a locale to build his visions of communism. In Guevara, the Revolutionary Government found the portrayal of the New Man, setting a benchmark for each Cuban to strive to meet. Fidel Castro’s memorial speech, made days after Che’s death, reveals this belief: “Che’s example will be the ideal model for our people...let them be like Che.”<sup>4</sup> Being like Che did not require an individual to engage in actual guerilla warfare, but, rather, to have a revolutionary spirit. The portrayal of Guevara’s nationalist pride, heroism, and focus on education was calculated by the Revolutionary Government to form a true communist society.

### **The Need for the New Man**

The Cuban Revolution and subsequent Revolutionary Government, led by Fidel Castro, aimed to rid Cuba of imperialist influence and create an ideal communist society. Revolutionary leader Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, a Castro collaborator, struggled with the question of how to transition from pre-1959 Cuba, a land of foreign-influenced sugar plantations and socioeconomic

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<sup>1</sup> Cuba. Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización. *Alfabetizamos*. Habana: 1961.

<sup>2</sup> Partido Comunista de Cuba. *Carteles Del 26 De Julio*. La Habana: Comisión de Orientación Revolucionaria del CC del PCC, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Ernesto Guevara, *Notas De Viaje*. 1st ed. Barcelona: Ediciones B, 2002. and Ernesto Guevara, *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War*. Melbourne, Vic.; New York: Ocean Press, 2006.

<sup>4</sup>Fidel Castro and David Deutschmann. *Che: A Memoir*. Melbourne: Ocean, 1994. 78.

inequality, to true socialism and communism.<sup>5</sup> Che, a well-read doctor, became the architect of communism in Cuba exposing Castro to the ideas of Marxism. The effects of this exposure is seen as Fidel Castro noted Che's opposition to communism's construction from existing capitalist structures in a 1987 interview, "Che was radically opposed to using and developing capitalist economic laws and categories in building socialism. He advocated something that I have often insisted on: building socialism and communism."<sup>6</sup> Guevara envisioned a perfect communist society, free from imperialist greed and "original sin" resulting from capitalism.<sup>7</sup>

The perfect society needed to be structured differently from pre-1959 Cuba in order to eliminate imperialism and capitalism. Agrarian Reform, accomplished in the early 1960s, eliminated US influence and restored much of the land to Cuban ownership. The formation of communism required more than a change in land ownership. For the perfect Cuban communist society to function, Guevara noted in his 1965 work, "Man and Socialism in Cuba", "a new man must be created simultaneously with the material base."<sup>8</sup> The recreation of Cuban society had to include a rebirth of the Cuban people because old mentalities would not bring about the change Guevara and other revolutionaries desired. Philosophical descriptions of the New Man were present in several speeches from Guevara and other Cuban leaders.<sup>9</sup> The Cuban government needed a prototype of the New Man to serve as an example of the traits of the New Man. The Revolutionary Government created this prototype using Guevara's image, actions, and legend.

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<sup>5</sup> Ernesto Guevara "The Meaning of Socialist Planning." in Bertram Silverman *Man and Socialism in Cuba; The Great Debate*. New York: Atheneum, 1971. 127.

<sup>6</sup> Castro and Deutschmann. *Che: A Memoir*. 147.

<sup>7</sup> Anna Serra. *The "New Man" in Cuba: Culture and Identity in the Revolution*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Ernesto Guevara, *El Socialismo y El Hombre Nuevo*. 1st ed. México: Siglo Veintiuno, 1977. 22.

<sup>9</sup> See Guevara, *El Socialismo y El Hombre Nuevo*. and Fidel Castro "Castro Describes His Plans for Cuba." Speech. Havana. 22 Apr. 1959. *Castro Speech Database*. UTexas.

### **Heroic Selflessness**

A Cuban Revolutionary War episode in the Alegría del Pío region of Cuba demonstrates heroism in Che's response to injuries suffered during the war. In his diary of the Revolutionary War, Che tells how he was shot during a December 1956 fight with resistance forces. An unexpected ambush devastated Che's battalion, leaving the leader among the wounded. Fellow rebel Faustino Perez, writes Guevara, considered Che's injuries to be fatal.<sup>10</sup> Still, blinded by pain, Guevara was able to shoot at the advancing enemy forces<sup>11</sup> and give orders to other rebels. Members of Che's battalion corroborate Che's version of the attack. Tad Szulc conducted interviews with various revolutionary guerillas (*rebeldes*) who fought alongside Che and under his command. Argelio Rosabal, who accompanied Che during the attack, provided specific details of Che's orders to his comrades. Rosabal, whom Che called "Pastor" due to his Christian faith, asked Che what action the group should take, seeing that their leader and others were injured. With a fresh gunshot wound, Che was still able to command his battalion to avoid losing weapons to the enemy, according to Rosabal:

"Che me dijo: "Pastor, mire, estas armas---ellos traían ocho rifles de mirilla telescópica, un saquito medio de balas, traían dos pistolitas...nosotros no podemos cargarlas porque el estado físico no lo permite. Usted coja y haga un hoyo en un lugar seguro, las envuelve en yagua o nylon, las tapa y las guarda"<sup>12</sup>

*("Che told me: Shepherd, look at these weapons. They brought eight rifles with telescopic sight, a half bag of bullets, and two pistols. We cannot shoot because our physical condition does not allow us. You take them, wrap them in palm or nylon, make a hole in a safe place, cover them, and guard them.")*

Utilizing these events, the Revolutionary Government created a picture of Guevara as a man who didn't pay attention to his own health. Instead, he concerned himself with taking action to win

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<sup>10</sup> Ernesto Guevara and John Gerassi. *Venceremos*. [New York]: Simon and Schuster, 1968. 30.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>12</sup> Tad Szulc and Otto G. Richter Library. *Tad Szulc Collection of Interview Transcripts*. Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Libraries, Cuban Heritage Collection, 1984; 1986. 10, translation my own.

the war. Che's ability to lead the revolutionary cause while a normal man would focus on his own health demonstrates the heroic, selfless "New Man". Che was a successful guerilla warfare strategist, but the government also promoted the perception of his heroic nature. Tales of his military heroism and nationalism assisted in this promotion became an example for all Cubans through history lessons, speeches, and accounts of the *rebeldes* themselves.

Historians sympathetic to the 26 July Movement and Cuban historical publications cite Guevara's struggle with asthma as an additional factor proving heroism during war. Where the Argentine military rejected him due to "diminished physical abilities",<sup>13</sup> the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement hailed his ability to not simply serve in the military, but excel as a military strategist and leader. These depictions were used by the government to make Guevara similar to other Cubans and portray the image that he fought through enormous odds to serve. Historian David Deutschmann, in the foreword of Castro's memoir of Che, remarked, "[Che] showed extraordinary bravery. He was a comrade who never pursued personal objectives...he was always ready to die, to sacrifice his life for the cause—this comrade who always had to carry medication for asthma, a vaporizer."<sup>14</sup> Deutschmann paints a heroic picture of Guevara in the beginning of his statement. His selfless sacrifice qualifies as heroic in itself, but Che's affliction with asthma added the improbable story of a man at a physical disadvantage who thrived in the Sierra Maestra.

Che's image did not simply spread through historians or published propaganda. The image of Che's heroism and fight through asthma was perpetuated through Fidel Castro, who years before Che's death, called Guevara the true hero of the revolution,<sup>15</sup> "throughout the [battle in the Sierra Maestra], he suffered from a severe attack of asthma, with nothing to alleviate it, but

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<sup>13</sup> Jon Anderson, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*. New York: Grove, 1997. 45.

<sup>14</sup> Castro and Deutschmann, *Che: A Memoir* 23

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

also without ever complaining.”<sup>16</sup> This reflection details the additional facets of the heroic quality of the New Man that the government wished to teach its citizens. Heroism is not simply bravery in combat, but also selflessness and sacrifice of oneself for the good of the community. Che accepted his challenges and embraced the role of a hero leader of the revolutionary movement.

A modern Cuban comic book entitled “La Marcha Invasora de Camilo y El Che” teaches children about the heroic strength of the *rebeldes*. Schoolchildren are depicted asking a professor to tell them an adventure story, to which the professor replies that he will tell them about the greatest true adventure, that of Camilo Cienfuegos and Che Guevara. Both Che’s Battalion 8 and Camilo’s Battalion 2 fought tough and bloody battles against pro-Batista forces. The comic captures their strength, noting that they battled relentlessly until victory, while facing hunger, thirst, and “condiciones climáticas terribles y...dos huracanes” (“*terrible weather conditions and...two hurricanes*”).<sup>17</sup> The gallant fighters, led by Guevara embody heroic courage as they encountered US-backed resistance troops, meager rations, and severe weather. The comic pays homage to the rebel leaders and indoctrinates children into the heroic traits of the New Man. Included in the drama of the Cuban Revolution is a similar reference to asthma, “es admirable cómo Che sobrelleva su asma en estas condiciones” (“*it is amazing how Che coped with asthma in these conditions*”).<sup>18</sup> Each rebel faced the harsh climate in the Cuban mountains, but Guevara’s additional challenges made him one of the most heroic in the eyes of the revolution.

On the surface, it seems odd that references to Che’s asthma emerge in so many accounts. Its inclusion was designed to Che similar to the Cuban people. Everyone has his or her own

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>17</sup> Israel Castellanos Jiminez, *La Marcha Invasora De Camilo Y El Che*. Havana. 2004. 13, translation my own.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 20, translation my own

struggles to overcome. While at a disadvantage in the hot and humid Sierra Maestra, he emerged as a heroic leader even while others were more physically capable. This creates an example for all Cubans and urges them to overcome their challenges and heroically serve Cuba, just like Che.

Che noted in “Socialism and Man in Cuba”, first published in 1965, a struggle that prospective New Man would face. Heroism in war was one thing, but a successful society needed citizens to display heroic attitudes every day.<sup>19</sup> Guevara used his writing to teach Cubans how to achieve such a task. In his farewell letters to his children, written in 1965, he provided a guide for them on how to act in the spirit of the New Man, “grow up as good revolutionaries...Remember that the revolution is what is important, and each one of us, alone, is worth nothing.”<sup>20</sup> These letters have a wider significance than simply father-child advice. Che figured himself as revolutionary father and guide to the Cuban people, and his advice encouraged heroic selflessness in their daily lives. Once Castro was in power, the revolution required individuals to give of themselves to the revolution’s goal of communism and an equal society free of imperialist influences. Che’s final advice to his children expanded the requirements of heroism beyond Cuba’s borders, “Above all, always be capable of feeling deeply any injustice committed against anyone, anywhere in the world. This is the most beautiful quality in a revolutionary.”<sup>21</sup> To Guevara, Cuba represented the first of many anti-imperialist revolutions in the Western Hemisphere. According to Che, a true revolutionary and heroic New Man would commit himself to their brethren around the world, as Guevara did in future attacks in the Congo and Bolivia.

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<sup>19</sup> Marifeli Sánchez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. 106.

<sup>20</sup> Ernesto Guevara, *Che: Letters of Farewell*. Trans. Carmen Gonzalez. Ed. Mayda Arguelles and Martha Acosta. Havana: Editorial Jose Marti/ARTEX, 1995. 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

### **Cuban Nationalism**

Che Guevara had pride in Cuba, although it was not his homeland. Cuba provided a laboratory environment for Che's revolutionary ideas and adopted him as a fellow compatriot. To cement this bond, Che signaled his affinity with the Cuban cause at the end of most of his speeches, which proclaimed "Hasta la victoria siempre...Patria o muerte" ("*Ever onward to victory...homeland or death*").<sup>22</sup> The battle cry represented a continual fight to achieve revolutionary spirit and expel imperialism from Cuba, and the rest of the world, permanently.

Nationalist pride included trust in the community. Material possessions were deemphasized because the state would take care of all needs. Guevara displayed this belief in his farewell letter to Castro, "I am not ashamed that I leave nothing material to my children and my wife, I am happy it is that way. I ask nothing for them, as the state will provide them with enough to live on and have an education."<sup>23</sup> Che trusted Cuban society and the future success of the New Man experiment enough that he left his beloved family in its hands. The release of his letters to the public furthered Che's influence on Cuba even after he departed for the Congo. His actions modeled the trust in the camaraderie and brotherhood that his ideal society had to include to be successful. While not every personal letter between Guevara and others were released, those that were teach the reader qualities of the New Man.

Besides displaying his own pride in Cuba as the vanguard of anti-imperialism in the Western Hemisphere, Guevara also served as a leader in whom fellow Cubans could take pride. *Cubanía*, nationalist pride in being Cuban,<sup>24</sup> pervaded post-1959 society because the Revolutionary Government made the promotion of *cubanía* was a central duty of Cuban authors

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 16. also appears in numerous publications by Guevara and other Cuban leaders.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>24</sup> John Kirk and Leonardo Padura. *Culture and the Cuban Revolution: Conversations in Havana*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, 2001. xix.

and artists. The artistic styles of old would not advance the New Man, so Guevara advocated “a new kind of expression likely to be enunciated by a new generation of revolutionary writers”.<sup>25</sup> As John Kirk and Leonardo Padura examine, Cuban artists received encouragement to break away from literary tradition and write using new styles with focus on Cuban identity, revival, spirit, and love.<sup>26</sup> New curriculum taught children about having pride in Cuba; similarly, art and literature indoctrinated the public at-large to *cubanía*.

To protect *cubanía*, Guevara and other government leaders censored the work of several artists. Cuban songwriter Silvio Rodriguez, an opponent of censorship, remarked, “we had to follow orders apparently given by a commission of the Central Committee of the Party whose job it was to approve songs, poems, and anything that had to do with Che Guevara.”<sup>27</sup>

Government imposed censorship protected Guevara’s image, crucial to the development of the New Man. Cubans needed an unequivocal role model, free of imperfections. At the expense of free speech, censorship achieved this goal.

Censorship did not stop at ideas. The government considered homosexuals to lack strength and be a liability to a strong nation. The government prevented homosexuals from being a part of Cuban society by eliminating their influence from the arts.<sup>28</sup> Guevara may not have directly blacklisted homosexuals from Cuban culture, but the fact that the strong, masculine Che was the ideal New Man impacted discrimination. The government could not allow a counter-example to flourish as well, so they discriminated against the perceived weak to solidify Che’s model. Abelardo Estorino reflected this idea when he traced the effects of Guevara’s idealization of the New Man, “many people thought that socialism could only be constructed by

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<sup>25</sup> Serra, *The “New Man in Cuba”*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Kirk and Padura. *Culture and the Cuban Revolution*. xix

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

perfect individuals and that as a result we imperfect ones had no role in this process”.<sup>29</sup> Che served as a strong role model and each Cuban was to strive to follow his lead. Those who deviated from the ideal image marketed by Che hindered the progress toward a society of New Men. They could not be part of Cuban culture because the government did not want Cubans to be proud of someone who did not embody the New Man. Cuban society’s focus on Che intensified discrimination against those who did not mirror Che’s embodiment, either in their person or in their ideas.

### **Desire to Learn**

The success of the new society depended on the creation of the New Man. To facilitate this creation, education was critical to teach the philosophy of the revolution into the minds of the population. While setting out the plans for Cuban society, Guevara asserted in 1965, “society must be a huge school.”<sup>30</sup> This bold claim set the foundation for the emphasis on education in Cuba. Before 1959, education was an intensely stratified system, favoring the wealthy in urban Havana and neglecting the rural poor. Under Castro and Guevara, education focused on rural and urban youth because they represented the future. Che characterized youth as, “the malleable clay with which the new man, without any of the previous defects, can be formed.”<sup>31</sup> These youth would be the future workers and contributors to society.

Che’s desire for society to function as a school does not simply mean that each member would be educated. As Ana Serra notes, it also symbolized the close control, like teachers over their pupils, that was required to maintain communist society.<sup>32</sup> The government’s control over the spread of Guevara’s ideal New Man did not, therefore, stop in cultural censorship, but continued its influence in education. This control extended past Havana and into rural Cuba,

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<sup>29</sup> Kirk and Padura. *Culture and the Cuban Revolution*. 58.

<sup>30</sup> Guevara, *El Socialismo y El Hombre Nuevo*, 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

<sup>32</sup> Serra, *The “New Man in Cuba”*, 11.

neglected pre-1959. The rural illiterate could not be socialized into New Men and had no use in society unless they learned how to read, so Guevara called for teachers to go to rural areas, where illiteracy pre-1959 was measured at 41.7%<sup>33</sup>. In addition to raising literacy rates through education, teachers expanded Guevara's image into the countryside, mirroring the selfless qualities that Guevara demanded in the New Man. In advocating for education and dedicated teachers, Guevara sought to create an entire generation of New Men, teachers focused on spreading the revolutionary spirit to their pupils.

The Revolutionary Government and Cuban Communist Party produced manuals for its citizens, socializing the people into the ideals of the New Man. In a guide to teachers entitled, "Alfabeticemos", the government produced lessons and guidelines for the fight against illiteracy. Education was vital to be a productive member of the communist society and a requisite feature of the New Man. Illiteracy, the enemy of the New Man, "was caused by underdevelopment resulting from imperialism."<sup>34</sup> In each literacy lesson, the authors included vocabulary crucial for the New Man to understand. The curriculum required teachers to teach about Fidel, Che, the evils of imperialism, and agricultural reform. The vocabulary mirrors the speeches of Guevara. For example, in his 1960 speech entitled "Deberes de la clase obrera en una Revolución" ("*Duties of the working class in the Revolution*") where Guevara urges the working class, "producir y ahorrar son las bases del desarrollo económico" ("*to produce and to save are the bases of economic development*").<sup>35</sup> In the guidebook entry on industrialization, the students learn the spelling, pronunciation, and meaning of three fundamental duties of the working class: to save, to produce, and to organize.<sup>36</sup> Not only did the focus on education raise school

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<sup>33</sup> [un]-(Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización. *Alfabeticemos*. 5

<sup>35</sup> Guevara and Gerassi, *Venceremos*, 241.

<sup>36</sup> Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización. *Alfabeticemos*. 36, translation my own.

enrollment to 95% nationwide<sup>37</sup> and literacy rates among the highest in the Americas,<sup>38</sup> it also socialized children into the ideals of the New Man. Young Cubans, the future of the Communist Party, held the success or failure of Guevara's radical experiment in their hands. With these ideals firmly implanted in memory from an early age, each child grew up knowing their duty in society.

Formal education was not the only method of socializing children into understanding their societal duty. The Ministry of Education implemented a methodological, structured education not solely to teach children, but also to perpetuate education outside of the classroom. Formalized education needed to work in order for what Guevara called indirect education to work: "Education takes among the masses and the new attitude that is praised tends to become habit; the mass gradually takes it over and exerts pressure on those who have still not become educated. This is the indirect way of educating the masses, as powerful as the other, structured, one."<sup>39</sup> This harkens back to Che's desire that society function as a school. Guevara, the ideal role model, was the supreme teacher. Each subsequent person educated in the qualities of the New Man indirectly acted as a teacher by example to those who hadn't yet transformed into the New Man.

### **Merging the Qualities**

Che's intention to create a society with new consciousness required each Cuban to change their mentalities. Founded on capitalist greed, the ideal society would be doomed before its start. Change could not occur without some blueprint of what the ideal society and New Man should look like. The Revolutionary Government used Ernesto 'Che' Guevara to provide prototype in his embodiment of the New Man. The portrayal of his military actions, even when

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<sup>37</sup> Stabile, *The Cuban Revolution*, 92.

<sup>38</sup> Stabile, *The Cuban Revolution*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Guevara, *El Socialismo y El Hombre Nuevo*, 24-25.

facing additional difficulty with asthma displayed heroism. Publications and speeches hailed his efforts and he became well known to every Cuban as the example of heroism. His writings expanded the need heroism from the battlefield into everyday life, which he modeled through selfless efforts, giving everything to the revolution and reminding his own children to do the same. Similarly, Che espoused Cuban nationalism even though he was an Argentine. He adopted Cuba as the vanguard of communism in the Western Hemisphere. Surely, a revolutionary leader could have achieved monetary wealth, but in order to keep the image of the New Man, Guevara wanted nothing. Che modeled the required trust in his nation to take care of all his family's needs.

The portrayal of patriotism and heroism made him someone Cubans could be proud to have as a leader. The government was invested in protecting his image, so stories about Che and other leaders were censored to paint only a pro-revolution stance to protect *cubanía*, the pride of being Cuban.<sup>40</sup> Artists, as encouraged by Che, wrote about the revolution and Cuba with revolutionary spirit, creating a strong culture. Discrimination of homosexuals and some women, examples of those who threatened to weaken the perceived strength of Cuba, aided in the goal of a strong culture because the “weak” were silenced. Strong revolutionaries, like Guevara were the ideal New Man. The government's censorship and discrimination inhibited the presence of a counter-example. The beliefs of the revolution were taught through formal schooling and indirect socialization. Guevara highly advocated for this educational process to provide instruction and training into how to be the ideal New Man. The benefit of increased education was the removal of illiteracy. Without illiteracy, a communist society could flourish because each man would be an integral part of society. Che strongly advocated education and created a model for teachers. The Revolutionary Government created Che's image so Cubans could look

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<sup>40</sup> Kirk and Padura *Culture and the Cuban Revolution*. 58.

to Guevara for a model of what they should aspire to become. Using his example, Cubans could participate and understand what the revolution required of them to recreate Cuban society. This participation was a goal of the Revolutionary Government. The image of Ernesto Guevara served as a means to achieve it.

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