

In arms' way. The 1960s Latin American New Left thinking on war and politics

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the theoretical debates about the relationship between politics and war within the Latin American “New Left” during the 1960s. Although these debates cannot by themselves explain the revolutionary mind-set of this new generation of political activists, they did contribute decisively, I argue, to its emergence including support to the armed struggle. Thus, my perspective moves away from one of the dominant interpretations, according to which the 1960s’ New Left was a direct result of previous and successful revolutionary experiences, such as the Cuban Revolution in particular. Following a critical approach, I will here propose an overview of the main theoretical inspirations of the 1960s Latin American New Left, detailing at the same time their uses and impact.

Keywords: New Left; 1960s; armed struggle; guerrilla warfare.

Resumen

El presente ensayo se enfoca en los debates teóricos sobre la articulación entre guerra y política que se produjeron en el seno de la «nueva izquierda» latinoamericana de los años sesenta. Mi hipótesis central es que —si bien dichos debates no son un factor explicativo único—, sí contribuyeron de forma decisiva en la conformación de un imaginario revolucionario nuevo y marcadamente generacional que llevó a sectores mayoritarios de la «nueva izquierda» a adherir a la lucha armada. Mi interpretación se separa, por lo tanto, de una de las explicaciones predominantes que ve en la militarización de la «nueva izquierda» sesentista un efecto de las experiencias revolucionarias exitosas del mismo período, en particular de la Revolución Cubana. El objetivo aquí es proponer una presentación sintética y crítica de las principales referencias teóricas del período, especificando al mismo tiempo los usos que les reservó la «nueva izquierda».

Palabras clave: nueva izquierda latinoamericana; años 1960; lucha armada; guerrilla.

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Introduction

Exploring the links between politics and war is like entering a minefield. It is no coincidence that the social sciences have for long been reluctant to consider the political implications of war and violence. When they do, they first draw a radical distinction between State and non-state use of force and consider the former as the sole legitimate – and often necessary – type of violence (Gurr and Graham, 1969: 10 and following).

Over the past two decades, legitimist theories on violence have prevailed in Western countries. Today, the “neutrality of State-issued violence” axiom meets with broad social consensus. Based on the doctrine of “killing well”, government discourses describe the uncritical use of autonomous weapons systems as a “humanitarian war” (Chamayou, 2016). At the same time, governments and the main media discourses criminalize regardless of practices, reasons and ideologies, evict from the political field all violence originating in non-institutional agency, and ban non-state use of force even in the case of low-intensity violence taking place during social protests. All the above rarely give rise to important reactions among civil society.

The gap between current social representations of political violence and those of forty or fifty years ago is quite remarkable. During the 1960s and the 1970s, broad political and social sectors considered either State or non-State violence as a legitimate path towards political change. The 1960s Latin America is no exception: back then, right- and left-wing political organizations shared the belief that war and politics are closely interlinked. Yet, since the establishment of military dictatorships in Latin America and the 1970s-1990s civil wars in Central America, the very fact that this belief was shared has been silenced.

In this essay, I will focus on the support to the armed struggle by sectors of the 1960s-1970s Latin American left either in discourse or on a practical level. I argue that this is a central facet of its history, a history that deserves to be understood in depth, without yielding to current biases. In other words, the essay resonates with recent studies (Franco and Levín, 2007; Oikión, Rey Tristán and López Ávalos, 2014; Marchesi and Yaffé, 2010: 95-118; Palieraki, 2016: 249-266) that take the risk of opposing decades of either silence or uncritical condemnation of non-State violence and subsequent support of State repressive practices. These studies have allowed historians to question dominant biased presumptions, such as the persistent attribution of political violence to the New Left. In this respect, it has been demonstrated that a wide range of individual and collective actors (often right-wing) were theorizing, legitimizing and using violence politically (Franco, 2012). Other studies have broadened the concepts of “revolutionary left” and “new left” by including in these categories organizations that, during the 1960s-1970s, did not resort to armed struggle (Torti, 2006: 19-32). Recent studies have also addressed the lack of historical context in previous research and have invited us to consider support for armed struggle not as a permanent and stable feature of certain organizations or ideologies, but rather as an unforeseeable and dynamic process.

In this paper, that partly builds on my research on the Chilean MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria - Movement of the Revolutionary Left) (Palieraki, 2014), I focus on one of the factors that most contributed to the 1960s-1970s new left’s support to armed struggle, namely the theoretical texts on the relation between politics and war which, during the 1960s, helped impose revolutionary warfare as a legitimate means to a radical social and political change.

The 1960s-70s *New Left*: a shift both generational and ideological

The theoretical debate on war and politics is central to the understanding of the “Long 1960s”, for several reasons: firstly, most studies have failed to understand how important these debates were in providing support to armed struggle.² Instead, they have been focusing on some emblematic and victorious revolutionary experiences, such as the Cuban Revolution or Vietnam. I argue that if revolutionary war occupied a significant place in the minds and actions of the 1960s-1970s New Leftists, it was not as much due to victorious historical experiences as to their theorization and schematization, and even more to theoretical texts on revolutionary warfare published from the 19th century to the early 1960s. The relevance of this debate is also due to its sub-continental scope: it can be traced throughout Latin America with minor variations. In other words, during the 1960s-1970s, a new revolutionary grammar emerged throughout the region, in which politics and war were viewed as intertwined phenomena, even if the interaction between theory, national context and political practices varied across countries (Marchesi, 2009; Nercesian, 2013). For instance, there were considerable differences between the Chilean MIR – that, up to the 1973 coup, limited its armed actions to some bank robberies without victims and abandoned armed struggle before Allende’s victory in the 1970 Presidential elections – and its fellow Southern Cone organizations, mainly the Argentinian PRT-ERP and the Uruguayan Tupamaros, that led numerous armed actions with victims both among members and the Police or the Army. Despite these differences, the theoretical debates here discussed apply homogeneously to all the 1960s-70s Latin American New Left and, even more so, to the Southern Cone organizations.

These debates were often the result of a generation gap. The Latin American New Left comprised of different organizations, political tendencies and generations.³ Confluence was possible due to the uniform condemnation of the “electoral and peaceful road to socialism” and the equally common belief that armed struggle was the only way for the revolution to succeed. However, initial consensus rapidly dissolved into divisions, evictions and in some occasions, into the creation of new organizations. Discrepancies were mostly revealed once members of the organizations addressed the practicalities of armed struggle and presented the first steps toward its implementation.

Today, debates on the technical forms of armed struggle – rural or urban guerrilla, mass revolutionary upheaval or a vanguard leading irregular warfare – may seem futile and even absurd. But at the time, they induced a fundamental question, the very definition of the political field, determined by its relation to war and violence. These disagreements also represented a generational conflict.⁴ Older generations of New Left activists – that eventually ended up being expelled from

2 I believe that the main cause for historiography’s lack of interest in theoretical debates that focus on revolutionary warfare is because this object of study is often connected to a liberal vision of history. Indeed, liberal historiography has focused on ideology (“communist” or “totalitarian”) as the sole or the main cause for using political violence and for mass crimes. My approach clearly differs. Even though I consider the activists’ theoretical stance on revolutionary warfare as a pre-condition for supporting armed struggle, I argue that the actual armed uprising depends on a diversity of factors. As for ideology, it is constantly interacting with the local and global socio-political context, as well as with political practices. Thus, it is necessary to focus on ideology, but without prejudging its practical outcome. On interaction between theory and armed practices in the case of the Chilean MIR, see Palieraki (2008).

3 Trotskyists were a majority amongst Latin American New Left’s activists of the older generation. Coggiola (1993).

4 On the concept of generation see Mannheim (1952: 276-320) and Edmunds and Turner (2005).

the organizations they belonged to—, were seeking inspiration in Clausewitz, Lenin, Trotsky or even Mao Zedong when producing theoretical texts on revolutionary warfare. Their main goal was to oppose traditional left-wing parties (namely the Communists and the Socialists) on their faith in elections and hence justify the need for a New, revolutionary left. In their writings, even though they argued for armed struggle, they clearly distinguished between the goal (socialist revolution) and the means (non-violent, electoral or armed struggle).

During the 1960s,⁵ a new conception of the relations between war and politics emerged through a younger generation of activists who ended up controlling most of the Latin American New Left. The younger militants identified goals with means, whereas they viewed armed actions as having a political meaning per se. Therefore, technical discussions on armed struggle (rural or urban guerrilla, popular warfare or foco theory) gained major relevance.

The lengthy hermeneutical essays of major theorists of revolutionary warfare such as Clausewitz, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Giáp, Guevara, Fanon, Debray and Marighella played a decisive role in this still slow but irreversible process of internal and generational division of the Latin American New Left.⁶ It was indeed the war of words that helped specify and further consolidate each generation's stand on the appropriate relation between revolutionary politics and violence. It was this same war of words that allowed the emergence of a new political culture and imagination, with which revolutionary warfare became increasingly central.

Thus, this essay will discuss important theories on revolutionary warfare in order to better understand the 1960s-70s Latin American New Left's political thought. The question of how the New Left used and interpreted these texts will also be examined.

For clarity reasons, I group these theoreticians into four different categories. The first one comprises all those that the older generation read and cited and that the younger generation criticized the most: Clausewitz, Lenin and Trotsky. All three of them share a common Universalist ambition and make a neat distinction between the military and the political fields, considering the former as being subordinate to the latter. The second group of authors includes Mao and Giáp. Their influence on the Latin American New Left was important, but selective and sometimes inconsistent with the original texts. Both Mao and Giáp preach a concept of politics that systematically integrates the use of violence, as well as a non-universalist vision, more suited to “peripheral” and “precapitalist” countries and regions. Both principles – the close relation between politics and war, and the desire to invent a theory on revolutionary warfare adapted to local contexts – become even more obvious in the writings of the third-worldist Fanon and of the Latin Americanist Guevara (prior to “Message to the Tricontinental”).

All aforementioned authors contributed to shaping the Latin American New Left's revolutionary thought either as examples or as counterexamples and constituted a major theoretical support to armed struggle. As a final preliminary observation, I would like to refer here to an interesting paradox with regard to the authors that inspired the 1960s New Left: the less universalist and the more supposedly adapted to local context was their theory on revolutionary warfare, the greatest was the importance they attributed to the military field, thus allowing a higher level of abstraction and disconnection from the social, political and ideological environment.

5 The process that I describe here takes place in the Caribbean, Central America and the Northern part of South America during the early 1960s, and in the Southern part of South America in the mid-1960s.

6 There is no space to develop here the dissemination of these theoretical texts nor their reception and adaptation to local contexts. Both topics have been analysed in Palieraki (2014: ch 5 and 6; 2008).

Politicizing the War: The Classics

The belief that politics were subordinated to warfare structured the theory and practice of a great part of the 1960s Latin American New Left. As soon as this principle was adopted, all political debate was reduced to a discussion on the technicalities of revolutionary warfare. The presumption that politics was subordinated to warfare largely stemmed from a critique of the theorists that informed the political education of the previous militant generations. Indeed, the younger generations of the New Left proposed different interpretations of classical authors from the ones offered by the Communists, the Socialists or the Trotskyists. It is, therefore, necessary to present the main ideas of these classical authors before explaining the way the New Left interpreted them.

The Prussian officer Carl von Clausewitz, founder of the modern military doctrine, inadvertently inspired the most important theorists of revolutionary warfare. Lenin and Trotsky, among others, were imbued with clausewitzian conceptions on war and its relation to politics. As Raymond Aron notes, Clausewitz is the first to propose the thesis of the “primacy of politics over strategy, of the head of State over the Commander-in-Chief, of the political goal over the military goal” (Aron, 2005: 45). Clausewitz made a sharp distinction between goals and means: the goals should be political, the means could be military, but in all cases subordinated to political goals (Clausewitz, 1995: VIII, 703). Furthermore, for Clausewitz war was a matter of State(s). Only when the latter exhausted all diplomatic and peaceful means, was it time for war. But war was in no case a substitute for politics.

Although he took war to be a State affair, the Prussian officer was among the first to theorize irregular warfare, also called guerrilla, popular or partisan warfare. A century later, when writing about partisans in China, Mao Zedong was to find inspiration in Clausewitz’s writings on guerrilla warfare. For Clausewitz, this form of war was useful and valuable because of its nature, which was both “vaporous and flowing”. As such, it allowed to escape from the enemies, while causing them important losses with the use of surprise attacks (Clausewitz, 1955: VI, 554 and following; Derbent, 2004).

Contrary to Mao, Clausewitz believed that partisan war is but a small war subordinated to a much more serious matter: the war between States and the confrontation between regular and professional armies. Clausewitz –who was a keen observer– nevertheless noted that an important additional feature of guerrilla warfare is the strong interrelation between the political and the military level. This feature would be a constant trademark of revolutionary thought from Mao Zedong onwards. For Clausewitz, revolutions are necessarily partisan wars. By calling for an armed people, revolutions transform men into soldiers, even before they become active citizens (Clausewitz, 1955: VI, ch. 6).

Lenin – a true disciple of Clausewitz – also stands for the subordination of warfare to politics, and for the clear distinction between goals and means (Derbent, 2004⁷). At first, the revolutionary party would need political leadership as well as a subordinate military wing. If class struggle intensifies and becomes a revolutionary war, then the revolutionary leadership has to develop an accurate strategy and manage every aspect of war, but it must also remain a political leadership. Even at the highest level of class struggle, war is but a means to an end.

In Clausewitz’s as well as in Lenin’s military thought, the State is the central figure. However, Lenin’s conception of the state is completely different; he aspires to a revolutionary and socialist state. Therefore, the protagonist of revolutionary war is the army under the commandment of the proletarian State, namely the Red Army. But the revolutionary army had to be perfectly pro-

7 In its appendix were published the notes that Lenin took while reading Clausewitz.

fessionalized and not a partisan army (Lenin, 1975: vol. 1, 233). According to Lenin, the turning point for any revolution is the moment when the old State's army is divided and partly joins the revolutionary cause (Lenin, 1970). For Lenin, partisan war is an option only in case of civil war or of resistance to a foreign occupation.

The Leninist conception of the relation between war and politics had concrete consequences for the Communist parties. On the one hand, it made them hold in contempt guerrilla warfare, a stand that lasted until the Cuban Revolution. On the other hand, it strongly influenced the Communist Parties' internal structure. The military apparatus was indeed always separate from the rest of the party structures, and subordinated to the decisions of the political leadership.

However, it is worth mentioning that the Bolshevik military thought owed less to Lenin than to the organizer of the Red Army, Leon Trotsky. His thesis on revolutionary warfare and more precisely, on insurrection, to which he dedicated a whole chapter in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, was basically inspired by his personal experience (Trotsky, 1985: vol. 11, 357-378). In this chapter, Trotsky theorizes the Russian experience and thus proposes a new influential revolutionary model. Trotsky's military thought was intertwined with two strictly political matters: firstly, the objective conditions that could allow an insurrection; secondly, the relation between the Party, the State and the masses.

Like his predecessors, Trotsky subjects warfare to politics (Trotsky, 1985: 361). For him, insurrection should occur only when the political means are exhausted. The depletion of political resources raises another important question: which are the preconditions for an insurrection? According to Trotsky, the first condition is "passive": absolute crisis of the established order. During the 1960s, Trotsky's first precondition provoked passionate discussions in Latin America and was heavily criticized by the New Left. The second precondition is to raise awareness among the masses and to foster their willingness to sacrifice and struggle. The third one is petit-bourgeois disillusionment and growing impatience amongst the wealthy, who will end up committing themselves to the poor, as the crisis worsens. Finally it is necessary that a vanguard party takes up a leading role in the on-going revolution (Trotsky, 1985: 362-363). According to Trotsky, the second and the last conditions determine the socialist character of a revolution. For Trotsky, and for the Communist and Trotskyist parties throughout the 20th century, revolution could only take the shape of a mass insurrection, and more precisely that of an insurrection of the urban masses assisted by the rural poor. This last point raises another relevant one, that of the relation between the vanguard party and the masses.

The masses and the party are the two main components of a revolution, but their strength only lies in their alliance and collaboration. According to Trotsky, the party without the masses and the masses without a party are the two main pitfalls of a revolution. Blanquism is a perfect illustration of the first one: a small group of conspirators organized a revolution by themselves, as they believed that the perfect mastery of the "art of insurrection" consisted of succeeding with neither popular support and participation nor any objective preconditions favourable to revolution. This conception of insurrection strongly resembles Guevarism.

But for Trotsky, mass insurrection is not a guarantee for success either. Drawing on the 1905 experience, Trotsky came to the same conclusion as Lenin in *What is to be done?* (1902): masses need a conscious vanguard to show them the way and to instil in them a common ideology. Organization requires centralization. Given that the last stage of insurrection should be armed confrontation, insurgent masses should convert to regular and proletarian armed forces, prepared to confront the professional army of the bourgeois State. In this respect, Trotsky does not differ from Lenin. They are both convinced of the importance of regular armed forces, which ex-

plains why revolutionary militias rapidly converged into a professionalized Red Army. Also, both Trotsky and Lenin were convinced of the importance of dividing the bourgeois Armed Forces and of their partial integration into the new revolutionary army.

Thus, for Trotsky, revolution depends on the objective pre-conditions that could bring about a mass insurrection led and centralized by the vanguard Party. In this way, popular insurrection can become a regular army that would attract a part of the Old Order's professional armed forces. Trotsky radically opposed the idea of irregular warfare that other Bolshevik occasionally defended (Beuvain, 2005: vol. 1, 51 and following; Deutscher, 1962).

War and Revolution in the Third World

Whereas Trotsky was always looking toward Europe, Mao Zedong put Asia in the eye of the revolutionary storm and of his theory on revolutionary warfare. One of Mao's goals was indeed to question Eurocentrism, which was still in his time a main feature of revolutionary thinking.⁸ This is likely one of the main reasons why Mao had a decisive influence on the early 1960s Latin American New Left. Mao somehow modernized Lenin's and Clausewitz's thought on revolutionary warfare.

Mao Zedong adhered to all technical principles that Clausewitz attributed to irregular warfare. His technical observations on guerrilla warfare were all borrowed from the Prussian official. Yet, Mao moved away from Clausewitz's ideas regarding the relevance of partisan warfare (Aron, 2005). Contrary to Clausewitz, Mao considers revolutionary war as a popular war, at least in its first stage. Therefore, guerrilla warfare is of central importance rather than an appendix to regular war (Mao, 1994: 478-480). As a consequence, the State is no longer the central figure of war but, instead, the main enemy, that needs to be defeated by irregular, dispersed and mobile revolutionary troops. In addition, the revolution's main space is no longer the cities, but the rural areas. As for the revolution's protagonist, peasants take the place of the proletariat (Mao, 1994: 480-481).

Ultimately, Mao Zedong calls into question the Marxist association between revolutionary warfare (and revolution, in general) and Western political and economic modernity. The countryside, which, according to Mao, is the central arena of revolution, is also the segment of the national territory most distant and remote from modernity. More importantly, according to Mao, the peasants are not only destined to instigate revolution, but also to use the countryside to surround and take the cities. In other words, pre-modernity is destined to invade, occupy and triumph over modernity (Pizarro, 1995: 396 and following). This is how Mao adapts the theory of socialist revolution to countries considered as "semi-colonial" (Mao, 1994: 478).

Mao also stated that the socialist revolutions to come would not take place in advanced or capitalist societies, but rather in the periphery. In the same way that the countryside would revolutionize the city, the Third World would invade capitalist countries, which will be the last ones to experience socialist revolution (Johansson, 2017).

Mao developed an additional argument to prove his thesis on peripheral revolution and its victory over the Western world. He noted the huge gap between political and economic development in China and concluded that this gap was a necessary pre-condition of a revolution. In brief, Mao's theory on revolutionary warfare does not focus on Western countries. Rather, it seeks immediate viability in all nations marked by this misalignment between political and economic development.

8 I will mainly refer to Mao Zedong's "Problèmes stratégiques de la guerre révolutionnaire en Chine" published in 1936. Extensive fragments were published in Mao (1994: 478-501).

The gap between political and economic development points to another crucial feature of Mao's military thought, the relation between politics and warfare. For Clausewitz, Lenin and Trotsky, war (revolutionary war, in the case of the latter two) would occur during the last stage and would be the "continuation of politics by other means". On the contrary, for Mao Zedong inequalities and the gap between political and economic development suffice to start a revolutionary war. In other words, for Mao, even though the goal is political (the overthrow of the existing regime), the means are always military (Chaliand, 1994: 26 and following).

The close connection between politics and warfare also appears in two other points that Mao makes. For him, the first stage of revolutionary warfare is necessarily a guerrilla war, thus an armed conflict actively involving civil population. Therefore, revolution is no longer a confrontation between regular armed forces – the revolutionary and the counterrevolutionary – leaving people aside. On the contrary, revolutionary war involves civil population by definition. Hence, revolutionary war is intrinsically "popular", a feature that the Great Helmsman stresses in all his military texts. In the countryside, the peasants' enrolment in the Red Army was also their first participation in national political life. This meant that peasants became full-fledged citizens or political beings mainly through war.

The close link between politics and warfare is also evident in the political role that Mao attributed to the Red Army. Indeed, for him, the Red Army was destined to play the role that Lenin and Trotsky attributed to the Marxist-Leninist party. For Mao, as for Lenin, the party was at the centre of decision-making. It was responsible for policing and mobilizing the population, for propaganda and for diffusing the common revolutionary ideology, thus providing unity and cohesion to the revolutionary camp (Chaliand, 1994: 24-26). But, contrary to Lenin, Mao did not consider the party as an organization separate and distinct from the Army. In Maoism, the Red Army is at the same time the armed force that would beat the enemy in the military field, and the political organization that would organize and mobilize civil population while shaping its ideology (Mao, 1994: 481-482).

The interconnection between politics and war in Mao's thought had an important consequence: considering that revolution does not have to wait for the existing regime to be in deep crisis before initiating the war against it, and that war undergoes all stages of revolution, revolutionary war is bound to be a long one (Mao, 1994: 484-490 and following). "Prolonged (or protracted) war" is yet another of Mao's contributions to revolutionary warfare theory, as far as it introduces the notion of time, absent from previous theoretical literature. According to Mao, there is no "decisive battle" that can determine the end of the war; revolutionary war is instead a long-term persecution of the enemy, that will eventually and as time elapses result both in the consolidation of the revolutionary camp and in the weakening of its enemies.

It did not take long before Mao Zedong's theory crossed the border of China. Indeed, his theory on revolutionary warfare could easily be adapted to all countries considered as peripheral. This ability to adapt to other contexts explains the enormous influence that Mao had on the Latin American Left. But the 1960s New Left chose to selectively read Mao's texts, disregarding several essential components of his theory. First of all, for the 1960s Latin American Left, the presence of a foreign invader in national soil, that Mao considered crucial in leading civil population to actively support the Red Army, was not an important factor for a revolution to begin.

The Latin American New Left also chose to forget about the Chinese revolutionary army's asset and historical power. Indeed, the Red Army was a political and military organization well-structured and highly disciplined, capable of controlling a considerable segment of the Chinese national territory, as well as hundreds of thousands or even millions of people. In

addition, popular support for the Red Army was not a result of armed struggle, but rather a pre-condition to armed confrontation to the State.

Finally, Mao viewed irregular war as the only possible form of popular war in the first stage of revolution. As soon as the Red Army was consolidated, the partisans would have to join it and participate in a regular war against the existing State. Mao did not consider that irregular and mobile war would have to go on for a long time. On the contrary, he insisted that it was necessary to centralize the revolutionary army and to eliminate the partisan mentality after the first stage of revolutionary war (Mao, 1994: 481-482, 485).

The Vietnamese political-military vision, as developed in the texts of Ho Chi Minh and Võ Nguyên Giáp, was similar to Mao Zedong's, in particular with regard to the partisan war and the need to combine it with regular warfare (Ho, 1994: 471-477; Giáp, 1994: 502-516).⁹ Nevertheless, the two Vietnamese theorists also introduced innovative features in their theories. Giáp's valorisation of the combatant's subjectivity was highly influential in Latin America. According to Giáp, morality, pugnacity, and solidarity among combatants could determine the outcome of a battle (Giáp, 1994: 505-506). The Latin American New Left received enthusiastically this idea, since it allowed them to insist on the importance of moral qualities rather than on the objective requirements, which were rarely met.

Giáp made another important theoretical contribution with regard to the relation between people and guerrilla war. "Guerrilla", he said, "is the form of armed struggle for the broad masses of people" (Giáp, 1994: 508). The popular nature of guerrilla war – a form of war much more accessible to non-professional combatants – was also obvious to Clausewitz and Mao Zedong. Nevertheless, for Giáp, this type of war allowed the formation of a new power, the "popular power" (Giáp, 1994: 506). This new form of power that Lenin attributed to the Soviets, was, according to Giáp, an intrinsic feature of partisan troops, something that strengthens even more the link between politics and war. The slogan "*crear, crear poder popular*" that the 1970s New Left shouted in the streets of Santiago was more of a tribute to Giáp than to Lenin.

However, the Vietnamese contributions more enthusiastically received by Latin American activists were of a practical nature. The first one was the determination of the enemy, namely US imperialism, which had shown his true face in Vietnam. The common enemy automatically created a direct connection between the Vietnamese and the Cuban, and more generally the Latin American revolutions.

In addition, Latin American New Left activists became extremely fond of Vietnamese weaponry. Having extremely limited resources, Vietnamese guerrilla fighters showed great creativity when fabricating weapons. Mini-manuals with designs and instructions on how to construct Vietnamese popular weaponry were edited and published in Cuba and then exported to the rest of Latin America.

Moralizing the War, Militarizing Politics

For Mao and Giáp, warfare has a crucial role to play in political action, while political violence is central to Third World revolutions. Other theorists of revolutionary warfare took one more step away from the classical texts of Clausewitz, Trotsky and Lenin: Not only do they state that revolutionary politics and warfare cannot be separated, but they also consider that the former should subordinate to the latter. Among them, the case of Frantz Fanon is of great importance not only because he served as a bridge between Latin America and the rest of the Third World, but also

9 See also Võ Nguyên Giáp (1968).

for having proposed a philosophical and ethical approach to revolutionary warfare rather than a theoretical or technical analysis of the process.

The Wretched of the Earth, first published in French in 1961 by François Maspero, and in Spanish in 1963 by Fondo de Cultura Económica (Fanon, 1991),¹⁰ proposes a philosophical and anthropological approach of war, as well as of revolutionary – and thus popular – violence. In a way, Fanon inaugurated a romantic and radical vision of violence, peculiar to the 1960s-70s New Left worldwide (Devés, 2003: 196-197). In addition, *The Wretched of the Earth* popularized a more expansive understanding of violence amongst the 1960s-70s New Left. Opposing the idea of the State's monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force, Fanon calls for a legitimate use of revolutionary anti-State violence. He considers injustice, social inequalities and colonialism as forms of violence used by the colonial or imperialist States and believes that these forms of totally illegitimate violence can only be eliminated by revolutionary violence. His argument was used by the 1960s-1970s New Left in Latin America, Europe, the United States and elsewhere in order to ethically and philosophically justify the revolutionary use of violence against the State (Fanon, 1991: 67-69, 126).

Fanon, a Martinican writer fully committed to the Algerian national struggle for independence, identified imperialism with colonialism. The bringing together of historically remote phenomena allowed him to attribute a revolutionary content to his third-worldist way of thinking.

Fanon's theses were adopted by the Cuban revolutionary government and popularised throughout Latin America, mainly thanks to the 1962 Second Declaration of Havana and the Tricontinental Conference (1966). For the Latin American New Left, Fanon's identification of imperialism with colonialism allowed to associate Latin American political struggles with the national liberation wars in Africa and in Asia, and to understand Latin America's fight as part of a Third World combat for national liberation. This is also what led the Latin American New Left to search for inspiration in the experiences of armed struggle in regions under decolonization, without however taking into account the important differences between their continent and Africa or Asia (Chaliand, 2004: 72 and following; Bensaïd, 2004: 194 and following).

Like Mao and Giáp, Fanon considers revolutionary violence as key to the popular classes' integration in the national community. According to Fanon, in colonised countries, the arms are the only equalitarian and unifying instrument peoples had in their possession: it is their way to participate in the process of liberation from the yoke of colonialism, and in the building of a new nation. But, in the Latin American context, the Fanonian vision of popular violence amounted to recognition of the States' failure to integrate popular masses into democratic and electoral procedures of decision-making after a century and a half of independent political life. This is how Fanon's texts paved the way to Latin American New Left's return to an old figure, which traced back to the independence wars: the people in arms.

Fanon does not only consider revolutionary violence as a response to the social violence of unjust political and economic structures, but he also recognizes in this form of violence a quasi-mystical essence. For Fanon, shedding blood is an action that goes beyond purely political goals, such as the liberation of a colonized country or its unification. Violence is intrinsically liberating; it is the foundation of the future nation (Fanon, 1991: 126). He also believes that "liberating violence" is a dormant seed in people's minds. It only needs a brief awakening before blooming and invading the whole community. In other words, for Fanon, it would suffice to show the arms to the people, in order for them to be able to violently confront their oppressors. Fanon's

¹⁰ FANON, F. (1963). *Los condenados de la tierra* (Ciudad de México: Fondo de Cultura Económica. I have used here the French version (Fanon, 1991).

ideas inspired 1960s-1970s Latin American armed movements, whose activists became convinced that the urban and rural poor only were naturally inclined to violence, in spite of considerable proof to the contrary.

Another essential thought that Fanon shared with other 1960s cult authors, is the identification of war with politics. "Tactics and strategy mingle", Fanon says, "the art of politics simply becomes art of war. The political activist is the combatant. Make war and make politics is one and the same" (Fanon, 1991: 170). By eliminating the differences between politics and war, between goal and means, Fanon makes of violence a liberating force. By assimilating the use of violence with the liberation of the oppressed, Fanon releases armed struggle from all need for legitimation, contextualization or political leadership. According to him, the armed struggle has an inherent political meaning, and thus the means replace the goal.

From this point of view, Fanon's ideas match perfectly with those of Ernesto Guevara, no matter how Guevara's texts were influenced by Maoism. Indeed, Guevara was indebted to Mao for the central role of guerrilla warfare (which had to be rural), the definition of the stages of revolution (first irregular war, and then regular) (Guevara, 1964: 87), the notion of strategic defence and offensive tactics and the belief that popular support was necessary for the guerrilla to succeed (: 81-169).

Nevertheless, there were also important differences between those two theorists, which became increasingly acute as Guevara simplified and theorized his personal experience in the Cuban guerrilla. These differences appeared more clearly in Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution?* (Debray, 1969) There is no doubt that Guevara and Castro supported this text, possibly written by all three of them (Castro, Guevara and Debray) (Childs, 1995: 593-624).

Guevara's first disagreement with Mao concerns the necessary pre-conditions to a successful and popular revolutionary war. Mao's essay focuses on the distinctive social, political and economic context of China in order to prove the relevance of revolution in his country. Guevara, on the contrary, contents himself with two pre-conditions: regime crisis and the escalation of peasants' demands, meaning access to the land. According to Guevara, these two conditions present in the Cuban case were enough to initiate revolution throughout Latin America.

Regarding the regime crisis, Guevara's stand is quite contradictory. On the one hand, he considers that when a government is nominated by election – regardless of whether the election was fraudulent or not –, in other words, when civic and peaceful means are not exhausted, guerrillas cannot win the battle (Guevara, 1964: 88). On the other hand, he often states that there are always enough objective pre-conditions to create a guerrilla focus (Guevara, 1964: 87-88). This internal contradiction present in Guevara's texts explains why regime crisis does not constitute anymore a pre-condition to the creation of a guerrilla. In the end, after the creation of a guerrilla, there will still be time to find the failures of the system in such a way as to guarantee the survival of the guerrilla with the support of the population.

But what truly differentiates Guevara from Mao Zedong, is Guevara's belief that the peasants' economic condition is sufficient for the popular support of a guerrilla. Whereas Mao takes into account economic, social, political and even ideological factors, Guevara focuses exclusively on the economic dimension of the equation, a dimension further limited to the land problem, which effectively was one of the main social issues in Latin America but not the only one.¹¹

At the same time, Guevara disregards all the pre-conditions that, according to Mao, explain the Chinese Red Army's success or the Vietnamese revolutionaries' massive base support. For

11 See Guevara (1964: 142): "Es esto un boceto, que transcribe lo que fue pasando en las distintas etapas de la guerra de liberación cubana, pero que tiene aproximadamente un contenido universal".

instance, Guevara considered the Japanese presence in China as a “parenthesis” (Guevara, 1964: 90)¹² and not as a crucial element which led peasants to join the Red Army. In brief, Guevara emphasises a general element (peasants’ access to the land) and removes every specific feature of the Cuban revolutionary experience that could oppose the general applicability of his revolutionary warfare theory.

Guevara’s exclusive focus on economic conditions has important limits. On one hand, Guevara’s theory is vulnerable, as far as he minimizes in the extreme the “objective pre-conditions” for a guerrilla. On the other hand, he subordinates all political analysis to military considerations. Therefore, according to the Guevarist theory, if a reduced group of determined combatants or revolutionary elite, initiated armed struggle in a tense economic context (which was the case in all Latin American countries), the popular masses would simply follow. In other words, military action is enough to generate political legitimacy and popular support.

The Guevarist thesis on the guerrilla could recall the Leninist notion of revolutionary vanguard. However, in Lenin’s and Trotsky’s understanding, the people’s relation to the revolutionary vanguard is crucial: the vanguard’s *raison d’être* is to lead the masses towards revolution. In other words: no masses, no vanguard. Mao and the Vietnamese are not really different from Lenin and Trotsky in this respect: they just replaced the Leninist party by the Red Army.

For all these theorists of revolutionary warfare, the ideology imparted to the masses is not a superstructural element, but rather the base and a necessary condition for the preservation of unity and internal cohesion within the revolutionary camp. On the contrary, the guerrilla, led by an armed revolutionary elite, is responsible for creating favourable conditions for the revolution. In this sense, Guevara’s politico-military conception is closer to Blanquism than to Leninism. There are no suggestions in Guevara’s texts on how to connect and articulate the revolutionary elite and the peasants’ masses that are supposed to support it. For “Che”, popular support should rise automatically. The notion of time, crucial in Mao’s thought, is absent from Guevara’s writings. As for the relation between politics and war, politics should come from military actions, as if by magic.

This over-simplifying vision is further radicalised in Régis Debray’s *Revolution in the Revolution?*, where we can find the famous saying that drove numerous Latin American Marxists-Leninists to despair: the revolutionary party should not exist before the guerrilla, but rather it should come from the guerrilla (Kaufmann, 1973: 20 and following). Extreme volunteerism, excessively optimistic assessment of the guerrilla’s capabilities, subordination of politics to warfare, and the belief that a guerrilla nucleus would rapidly manage to conquer: this is the main legacy of Guevarism to the Latin American New Left. These features are to be found – in different proportions and combinations – in all 1960s-1970s Latin American New Left organizations, before successive failures led them to question the basic hypotheses of the Guevarist theory on revolutionary warfare.

Conclusion

Many are the researchers who viewed the rise of armed revolutionary movements in the 1960s-1970s Latin America exclusively as a result of the Cuban Revolution that other countries’ revolutionaries would have tried to imitate and reproduce in their own nations. This paper’s aim was not to deny the decisive influence that the Cuban Revolution had on the 1960s-70s Latin

12 “En ambos casos [China y Vietnam], hay un paréntesis de guerra patriótica contra el invasor japonés, pero no se desvanece la base económica de lucha por la tierra [...]”.

American New Left; an influence that certainly needs to be interpreted as an active process and placed in its historical and geographical context (Palieraki, 2017: 117-136).

Instead, this paper focuses on the 19th and 20th century European, Asian and Latin American theoretical writings on war and revolution that were key to the foundation of the 1960s-70s Latin American New Left's revolutionary thought. This has led me to explore the theoretical foundation of the New Left's support to armed struggle. Indeed, even in the case of the Cuban revolution, it is not so much the revolutionary experience per se, but its subsequent theorization, which makes it influential and "transferable" to other realities.

Of course, the 1960s-1970s New Left's theoretical background does not suffice to explain its support for armed struggle. We would also need to examine who are the cultural mediators—the revolutionary States such as Cuba or China, who pay for translations, impressions and the texts' dissemination or the militant publishers— and what their motivations are. In addition, we would need to reflect on the variety of political functions within the revolutionary organizations performed by support for armed struggle. And we should probably ask ourselves to what extent the identification between violence and politics operated by the 1960s-1970s New Left in Latin America consolidated its presence in the media and public debate. How are theoretical debates on the relation between war and revolutionary politics related to the divisions and reconfigurations of the New Left during the 1960s, 70s and 80s? What was their impact on those activists that undertook armed struggle and the ones who did not? Or even, was the support for armed struggle compatible with the respect for the legal and democratic framework and the participation in elections?

All these questions go beyond the scope of the paper, but call for further exploration, which is necessary for a critical and complex approach to the history of the 1960s-1970s Latin American New Left.

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