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The Symbolic Detachment and Commodification of Che Guevara: Evaluating the Cultural Status of His Iconic T-Shirt

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Abstract. This article investigates the widespread cultural phenomenon of Ernesto Guevara's portrait printed on commercial T-shirts, addressing the core debate over whether Che "deserves" such popular representation. Departing from conventional moral evaluations of Guevara as a historical individual, the research adopts semiotic theory and Wittgenstein's theory of meaning as use to develop its analytical framework. The study distinguishes two modes of interpreting the term "deserve": retrospective moral judgement based on historical conduct, and recognition of culturally constructed symbolic status. It further examines the commodification paradox, exploring how commercialisation and re-radicalisation coexist in the circulation of Che's image. The analysis demonstrates that the Che figure on consumer goods has evolved into a collectively constructed sign, semantically separated from the historical Ernesto Guevara. The research concludes that the question can only be coherently resolved through the framework of cultural status rather than moral assessment. The Che symbol earns its pervasive cultural standing through sustained collective usage. Its ambiguous, unfixed meaning is an enduring feature rather than a temporary state, and no moral judgement of the historical figure can reverse the established cultural existence of this global symbol.

Keywords: Che Guevara, symbol, commodification, semiotic separation, cultural sign

1. Introduction

Can you imagine that is that a revolutionary who dedicated his life to overthrowing capitalism is now being capitalist goods? Alberto Korda's 1960 photograph, Guerrillero Heroico, was remade and spread to T-shirts and consumer goods worldwide. As Casesy argues that a represent of anti-capitalism now is becoming the typical product of the capitalism [1].

2. Literature review

Asking whether "Che" deserves the T-shirt always draws us into a thinking way, about whether Che was a moral hero or a violent authoritarian leader? But this is not the nature of the debate. The real issue is whether "deserve" can operate when its subject is no longer a historical person, but a collectively constructed symbol that had already got rid of the original referee [1]. This essay argues three aspects. First, the T-shirt's image has undergone decades of commercialization and re-

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radicalization, a process that has detached from any single author, movement, or fixed meaning, so the "Che" on the T-shirt is not Ernesto Guevara but a collectively constructed sign. Second, "deserve" splits into two modes, retrospective moral judgment and status-based acknowledgment, and the latter is suitable for evaluating symbols. Third, the commodification paradox does not erase radical meaning completely, that's because the commodification and re-radicalization coexist [1, 2].

3. Che as a sign: symbolic separation from the historical figure

Saussure divided signs into the signifier (sound/image) and the signified (the corresponding meaning), arguing that their connection is arbitrary and not fixed, shaped collectively by social communities [3]. "Che" is a signifier, a sound, a set of letters, and can be treated as a symbol. Its signified meaning has expanded beyond Guevara himself, now covering everything associated with the name: the rebellious emotion, the capitalist sign, the man. The T-shirt could be seen as material carrier of signified.

Casey wrote about his book not about Che himself but the society who made "Che" [1], arguing that the sign has become "a collective pool of dreams, fears, beliefs, doubts, and desires that make up the human condition" [1]. Effectively, Che was turned into a postmodern symbol [4]. A gap in fact occurred between signifier and signified in practice: when consumers wear the T-shirt, the "Che" they mentioned is not the historical figure whose actions could be judged, but a sign whose meaning is made by its users rather than fixed by its origin. Most wearers today do not know who Guevara was, which could prove that the signifier has far away from Che himself.

Objects accumulate new layers of meaning, after they experienced different people, places, and contexts [5]. Che's photograph traveled from Korda's origin photo, to Fitzpatrick' s redesign pop art, into mass production and global markets, and eventually reused by the Latin American political activist. At every stage, different groups, photographers, manufacturers, consumers, added their own layer of meaning, until the signified broke free of the historical figure Guevara [6].

4. Two interpretations of "deserve": moral judgement and cultural status

"Deserve" is a concept connects to the moral judgement toward a person, and this essay distinguishes two modes of the judgment. Mode A, retrospective moral judgment, determines what someone deserves based on freely chosen past actions. Mode A presupposes a causal link between action and evaluation, and it is the standard based on ones' merit. Applied to Che, Mode A would examine the historical record: his role in the Cuban Revolution, his oversight of executions at La Cabaña, his embrace of violence as a political instrument, his anti-democratic ideas [7]. The question Mode A asks here is whether these actions worth commemorating by the people on a T-shirt worldwide.

Mode B is a completely different logic, it does not make a judgement about a people's moral standard, but it asks has the symbol reached a status that could not be reversed after the large-scale circulation. Che as a symbol was worn by millions, waved at protests, painted on murals, debated in academic journals, has it become a cultural landscape that could not be denied? The image now appears across contexts that could be shared by different items: punk album covers, business school case studies on branding, museum retrospectives, and government propaganda, each treating 'Che' as though it is self-evident, despite no one make the unified agreement [8, 9]. This is an admittance of the cultural fact rather than a commendation of a person.

A conceptual trap has been built by the original question. The signifier "Che" does not have a stable signified; the signified has divided. "Does Che deserve his iconic T-shirt?" exposes that

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instability: the signifier seems refers to a person, but on the T-shirt, it refers to a symbol. "Deserve" is a moral predicate that needs a stable subject whose actions or qualities for evaluation, and here the subject is not stable. The subject is divided into 2 aspects, the person who can be morally judged and the symbol that collectively constructed and decided by the circulation. The question can't be answered unless the split problem could be answered.

The model B then should be applied. As applying Mode A means selecting only one signified, the figure Guevara, and ignoring the Che as a symbol in Mode B. The T-shirt's "Che" corresponds to the expanded signified meaning, not the historical figure Che himself, as it has been remade by the muti-national companies and the users worldwide. So, moral judgment of Guevara can't settle what the T-shirt means. Under Mode B, the question finally becomes coherent: has the symbol attained an irreversible status through circulation? Yes, the symbol is worn by millions, waved at protests, painted on walls, and debated in journals. This Che symbol does not mean the historical Che is a man should be admired for his deeds, but the personal existence has no direct connection to the T-shirt cultural existence.

Why should irreversible circulation amount to "deserving" anything, rather than simply describing how far an image has spread? Wittgenstein's account of meaning offers an answer. Against the idea that a word's meaning is fixed by what it originally named, Wittgenstein argued that meaning is constituted by use: to ask for the meaning of a sign is to ask how it functions within the practices of those who use it, not to ask what it once pointed to [10]. The same logic applies beyond words to images: a symbol functions through the patterns of its use, not through fidelity to its first appearance. On this view, a symbol's status is not granted by an external authority weighing whether it is worthy. However, it is built, instance by instance, by the communities that use it — protesters, artists, scholars, consumers. To say the Che symbol "deserves" its cultural status, in Mode B, is to say that status was produced by exactly the kind of sustained, patterned use through which symbolic meaning is ever produced. It is not a reward for past virtue. It is recognition that the symbol's meaning was the only way that acknowledge the true meaning the symbol earned.

5. The commodification paradox: coexistence of commercialisation and re-radicalisation

One objection survives that advocate that the expanded signified is not a neutral entity, and its most visible carrier, the T-shirt, is itself a product of the capitalist logic Che spent his life trying to overthrow. This is the commodification paradox: a sign whose historical meaning was opposition to capitalism has become, through its material carrier and become the vehicle for the capitalist consumption. The T-shirt is made by the low pay workers and sold through the international market; each process embodies the capitalist logic Guevara opposed. Whether any revolutionary meaning survives on the T-shirt is being debated. The strongest case against Che "deserving" the shirt comes Alvaro Vargas Llosa, who calls the Che phenomenon a "myth" that obscures the historical figure's record as an authoritarian who opposed democratic government [11]. On his reading, the T-shirt is the ultimate mockery: an anti-capitalist revolutionary reduced to a capitalist brand, his face emptied of political content and refilled with consumerist meaning. What the buyer purchases is not familiar with Guevara's beliefs but an aesthetic of dissent that expelled all the political meaning. The T-shirt does not commemorate Che, but it erases him, and an erased man cannot "deserve" anything. This is a serious counter argument. Vargas Llosa is right that an anti-capitalist symbol has become a new carrier of consumerism.

But Vargas Llosa's opinion on commodification is absolute and final, as if political meaning, once commodified, is disappear forever. Some evidence could be used to counter it. Che T-shirts still circulate within Latin American protest movements as deliberate political statements, indicating that

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the T-shirt form still has the re-politicization circumstance. At demonstrations against austerity policy in Argentina and Chile in recent years, protesters have worn Che T-shirts specifically printed with slogans referencing current grievances, reusing the same commercial object Vargas Llosa treats as proof of erasure. The Zapatista movement in Mexico places Che's image on murals alongside other revolutionary heroes such as Simón Bolívar, reusing it as a slogan rather than a commodity [6]. Cuban doctors sent to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake wore uniforms bearing Che's image, invoking the idea of universalizing revolutionary spirit rather than the market value [2]. Vargas Llosa has identified one path the image has taken, but it is not the only one. Che continues to be reused as a political symbol, to against the unequal existed political system.

6. Discussion

Che is not unique in this aspect. Jeremy Prestholdt traces the same pattern of commodification and contested meaning through the images of Bob Marley, Tupac Shakur, and Osama bin Laden, all likewise transformed into globally circulated commercial goods [12]. The comparison is structural rather than moral: it concerns how a figure's image becomes detached from biographical fact during the circulation, not the claim that all four people are morally the same. Once a signifier of dissent enters global spreading circle, Prestwold argues, its signified expands and fragments. It is commodified by corporations; the original meaning is exploited and are simultaneously available for re-radicalization by new movements [12]. No case undergoes only one of these processes. The undecidability in the Che case, is not a single case, and shows how rebel symbols behave inside global consumer culture.

7. Conclusion

The answer is "Yes" to the opening question. The symbol now circulating as "Che" has reached a status of the cultural landscape. Not because the historical Guevara has a high moral standard that should be highly admired by the people, but because the signifier points to an expanded signified, a global culture whose meaning is made collectively by those everyone who used it, while the true historical figure could not fix it. This process can't be withdrawn. No moral argument can delete a symbol worn by millions. And no single authority, not Vargas Llosa's condemnation or any people who defend Guevara, can fix what the symbol definitively means. Its meaning is problem that could not be settled, and the coexistence of commodification and re-radicalization is not a temporary mixture. It is the symbol's permanent condition. Che "deserves" the T-shirt only in this sense, not as a verdict on the man himself, but as recognition that the symbol earned its status through collective use for a long, no biographical judgement can draw it back.

The Che T-shirt does not memorize a person completely, when a signified meaning expanded beyond its original object, it belongs to no single author or only one thing. It marks the moment the name outgrew its owner and became a vessel that everyone can fill it with different opinion and ambition.

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