

Cuba through the eyes of Che's grandson

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2021

a review of

33 Revolutions by Canek Sánchez Guevara, Translated by Howard Curtis. Europa Editions 2015

Les Héritiers du Che (The Heirs Of Che) by Canek Sánchez Guevara and Jorge Masetti. Presses de la Cite 2007

"The persecution of homosexuals, hippies, free thinkers, syndicalists, poets (dissidents of a sort) certainly seems in excess of what was being combated. The criminalization of being different has nothing to do with freedom. Neither does the concentration of power in the hands of a few form part of anarchist ideas, and even less so the perpetual surveillance of individuals or the prohibition of any associations that may be formed on the margins of the State."

—interview with Canek Sánchez Guevara, grandson of Che Guevara, published in the Mexican magazine *Reforma*, October 17, 2004 (translation, FE staff)

This past summer Cuba experienced widespread large-scale protests which continue to have ramifications in the form of a massive government crackdown into the fall and winter.



Havana, Cuba, anti-government protest, July 11, 2021

On July 11, people took to the streets in at least six of the 14 provinces, in more than forty towns and cities across the island. There were approximately 584 protests with the participation of some 187,000 people.

There have been protests against a variety of injustices over the years, including several protests by hundreds of artists, some of whom are anarchists, in the San Isidro Movement, demanding freedom of artistic expression and a stop to harassment and imprisonment.

But the protests of last July were different because they erupted without any groups or individuals organizing or guiding them. They were also significantly larger than usual and involved a high proportion of poor Afro-Cubans, who don't generally turn out in large numbers for street demonstrations.

Most of these protests involved crowds of people shouting demands for improvements in living conditions and sharing slogans that have gained popularity on social media over the past year or more. Many chanted "Down with the dictatorship," calling for an end to the 62-year-long one-party state rule.

Quite a few sang a popular hip-hop song which proclaims the desire for "Homeland and life"—openly challenging the government's slogan "homeland or death," that glorifies sacrifice for the state. Others carried homemade signs with the lyrics or played recordings of it. Cubans openly expressed their outrage over the exploitation, impoverishment and oppression of the majority while the few at the top of Cuban society flaunt their lives of luxury.

Despite the government's attempts to blame the island's problems on outside agitators from the United States, there are real systemic corruption and mismanagement challenges that are not going away soon.

Probably most frightening to the rulers, many in the demonstrations were shouting, "We don't have fear any more," referring to the strong fear of repression that has kept so many from protesting over the years. Many Cubans have reached the point of desperation where they will not be stopped by the widespread surveillance, arrests, brutalization and imprisonment that the police and security forces institute against the population.

The novel *33 Revolutions* by Canek Sánchez Guevara, offers a discerning and emotional glimpse into the life of ordinary Cubans under the authoritarian communist regime.

For those who can read Spanish or French, the non-fiction *Heirs of Che (Les Héritiers du Che)* enhances understanding of both Canek's novel and the lived reality. I hope this book will be translated into English so more people can read it.

Hilda Beatriz Guevara, Che's oldest daughter, and Alberto Sánchez, a Mexican leftist, were married in Cuba. Canek, her first child, was born there in 1974.

When Canek was six, his parents took him to Italy, Spain and then Mexico. He and his mother returned to Cuba in 1986 when he was twelve.

In *Heirs of Che*, Canek relates the excitement and hope the return to Cuba initially inspired in his twelve-year-old self. But as a budding teenager who grew up in a leftist family outside Cuba, he learned the importance of asserting workers' rights to demand improvements in pay and working conditions, to strike, and to protest against social and economic inequalities and injustices.

He also got a taste of metropolitan culture, including punk music, movies, literature and personal self-expression. Canek was unpleasantly surprised by the Cuban regime's legal restrictions and informal limitations on music and art, creative writing, news reporting, clothing and even hair styles. There also came the recognition of the extreme economic and social inequalities maintained and newly created by the regime, including the comfortable houses, restaurants, exclusive clubs and stores with food, clothing, furniture, and other luxuries only open to highly placed Cuban government and party functionaries and their families, along with foreign diplomats and tourists.

As the grandson of Che Guevara, Canek got to know many of the children of the elite and to visit exclusive clubs and homes. But, he also made friends with ordinary Cubans who shared his interests in music, art and literature.

Through his teenage Cuban friends, he became aware of government policies against LGBTQ people, Afro-Cubans, and those viewed as cultural rebels like himself.

He was disgusted by "the criminalization of difference, the means of persecution of homosexuals, hippies, free thinkers, trade unionists and poets" and the installation of "a socialist bourgeoisie...falsely proletarian."

The novel, *33 Revolutions*, tells a tale of unrequited hope and frustrated desire, both personal and social. It weaves together the realities and dreams of individuals and society, the personal and the political, on the island of Cuba where idealism has been ground down to empty sloganeering evoking the repetition of the deteriorated sounds of an old worn-out 33-rpm vinyl record, thus the novel's title. This theme is repeated throughout the novel, utilizing different aspects of life.

The main character is a young, unnamed Afro-Cuban man who attempts to live up to the expectations of his father, his teachers, the Party and the state. But he is unable to find satisfaction either in work or love by the path prescribed.

His father came from a poor Afro-Cuban peasant background, while his mother was a city girl. Both his parents were enthusiastic supporters of the Revolution. After the Castro takeover in 1959, his father was rewarded with a bureaucratic job in the agrarian sector. However, after years of dedicated service he was falsely accused of misappropriation of funds, and became so upset and humiliated by this injustice that he died of a stroke-or a broken heart.

Even before his father's humiliation and death, the young protagonist was becoming aware of the choking and degrading constraints of the everyday world around him. Out of curiosity, he began reading books of all sorts and dreaming about the world outside the narrow confines of life as he found it. But this led him to be acutely aware of the repetitious constraints of the society he actually inhabits.

The protagonist's job at a government ministry is tedious and boring, requiring "checking and stamping papers, signing memos, writing reports, making copies, putting up with the manager, and not much more." Ground down between nightmares and passions, he loses fear, but a way out isn't easy.

In the non-fiction *Heirs of Che*, Canek tells us of his discomfort and intense aversion to the conformity required of children and adults in Cuba.

At about 15 or 16, Canek decided to undertake a serious reading of his grandfather's essay, "Socialism and Man in Cuba." In school, he had only had to memorize a few passages. He became deeply disturbed by Che's description of youth, as particularly important "because it is the malleable clay with which we can build the new man."

Canek immediately recognized that despite being a rebel in his own time Che wanted to require all youth to submit to manipulation from above and to sacrifice their own individual social, political or aesthetic or artistic impulses to what the Party and the State thought best. Canek understood this as the basis of the social order that was oppressing him and so many others.

Because Che was his grandfather, even without ever having known him, Canek wanted to be comforted and reassured by him. He loved Che as a grandfather but "felt hurt and humiliated...like a lab rat, and, even worse, caught in a failed experiment."

This understanding led Canek to develop outspoken anarchistic criticisms of the regime. It became clear that there would be no happy future for him in Cuba. He found it necessary to leave at the age of 22 in 1996. He returned to Mexico.

Canek Sánchez Guevara was able to develop his talents as a musician, photographer, graphic designer, and writer. He became an anarchist as a young adult and devoted much of his writing to challenging the myths of the one-party dictatorship in Cuba.

He died prematurely in 2015 at the age of 40 while undergoing heart surgery.

Sylvie Kashdan is a member of the *Fifth Estate* editorial collective.

FE Note: A short biography of Canek Sánchez Guevara by Nick Heath is available on the Anarchist Library site **theanarchistlibrary.org**.

Also, see the FE archives at fifthestate.org for articles about Che Guevara on how the publication's perception of him changed from when his image adorned covers in the 1960s, to recent more realistic portraits of him closer to his grandson's view. Click on Search at the top of any page to find articles in the archive that discuss Guevara.

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/410-fall-2021/cuba-through-the-eyes-of-ches-grandson>
Fifth Estate #410, Fall, 2021

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