Where’s Che? Politics, Pop Culture, and Public Memory in Rosario, Argentina

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Photographs by the author unless otherwise noted

In 1928, just before delivering her first child, Celia de la Serna and her husband, Ernesto Guevara Lynch, abandoned their rustic homestead in the territory of Misiones for the relative comforts of Rosario, Argentina. Here, on June 14, their son Ernesto was born. His first home, a luxurious three-bedroom apartment, befitted his parents’ aristocratic status. Setting the pattern for an itinerant life, baby Ernesto spent just a few months in his birthplace, leaving Rosario before he could even walk. Life would take him to Misiones, Córdoba, and Buenos Aires, his other homes in Argentina; to Chile, Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia, as a young adult discovering the social inequalities of South America; to Guatemala, Mexico, the Congo, and most famously, to Cuba, as a communist revolutionary; and finally to La Higuera, Bolivia, where he met his end at the hands of the Bolivian army in 1967.

To begin to answer these questions, it is crucial to place the use of Che’s memory within the broader political context of Argentina since his death in 1967. Memories of high levels of political violence from the 1960s to the 1980s made Che an inflammatory figure for a generation of middle-class Argentines. For years the preference was to repress memories of these intense, often savage times, and this made Che a sensitive topic simply for everyday conversation, making thoughts of official commemoration impossible. To refashion public spaces in his honor required not simply the passage of time and generational change, but also a domestication of Che’s image. This transformation, which was accomplished through the influence of popular culture, particularly sports, music, movies, and tourism, made remembrance possible. However, consumer culture cannot completely erase his principal identity as a firebrand of revolution against capitalism and imperialism. As a result, Che continues to stir controversy while becoming a useful symbol for the reenergized Argentine left.

Che and Rosario: A Personal Observation

Since 1995, I have traveled frequently to Rosario, a working-class city largely populated by the descendants of Italian and Spanish immigrants (Figure 1). Despite being home to over a million people, Rosario has long lived in the shadow of Argentina’s major metropolis, Buenos Aires, just 300 km down the Paraná River. While my research projects have usually taken me to other parts of Argentina, I have tended to approach Rosario less as a focus for scholarship than as a place to periodically strengthen and renew the bonds of family and friendship, and to enjoy the company of the garrulous, sarcastic, and frequently entertaining...
Che’s own biography and self-construction add special complications and texture to the story of his commemoration. Che was born and raised in Argentina, and his national identity is a key biographical detail. After all, his Cuban partners in the revolutionary struggle called him “Che” because it is the term Argentinean men use to hail one another—“Che, como andás?”—“Hey man, how are you doing?” But Che also crafted an image that was meant to transcend nationalism: more of a global citizen than an Argentinean. Though he is most identified with the successful Cuban Revolution, Che also sojourned in Guatemala, Mexico, the Congo, and Bolivia, hoping to spark a worldwide revolution of peasants and proletarians, one country at a time. His dramatic odyssey is an alluring part of his legend. It even draws tourists to stage pilgrimages that reenact the journeys that shaped his philosophy and mission in life. At a deeper level, Che was the avatar for his own ideal of El Hombre Nuevo or “The New Man”: that is, a man who would eschew the essential trappings of modern life, including a national identity. As his daughter Aleida puts it, “my father was a man who transcended all geographic boundaries … this man smashes borders” (Guevara March 2007). If, as the journalist Michael Casey contends, Che’s image is a product of a communal global culture, then commemorating Che in Rosario presents a kind of paradox: How does a place “lay claim” to someone who, in life and in death, has resisted being tied down to a particular place or nation?

Nonetheless, with increasing urgency, the city of Rosario has tried to lay claim to the elusive legend of its prodigal son, by refashioning public spaces to mark his life and legend. There are three sites that “officially” commemorate Che Guevara in Rosario: the apartment building where he was born, the nearby Plaza de la Cooperación, and a small plaza at Parque Yrigoyen that features his likeness in bronze (Figure 2). Each of these places tells a unique story about how, when, and why Guevara was remembered, and of the changing politics of public space in the city.

The Birthplace

The home where Guevara was born, on the corner of Entre Ríos and Urquiza streets, would be an obvious focal point for commemoration (Figure 3). Yet until quite recently, the owners of the building have resisted every effort to make this a public space. For years, the site of Che’s birth was known to locals by word of mouth but there were no tangible markers of its historical significance, such as a brass plaque, an otherwise commonplace sight in Argentine cities. It is an elegant and immaculately-maintained building, but not one that stands out from other exemplars of the Parisian-style architecture of the early 1900s, which is seen frequently in the downtown area. As is often the case in Rosario, the narrow and busy sidewalks, along with the proximity of the façade to the street, prevent a lingering appreciation of the building’s features. Moreover, for some admirers of Che, the conditions of his birthplace may be problematic, since he was born into comfort. If the circumstances of Che’s death evoke a Christ-like martyrdom (Casey 2009; Kunzle 1997), his birthplace is no humble manger. Indeed, Che’s most steadfast critics often dwell on his bourgeois upbringing, which supposedly made him an inauthentic communist. Tellingly, the building itself still bears no mark of Che. After much negotiation, the municipal government placed a banner on the street that reads, “Casa Natal ‘Che’ Guevara,” (Birth home of “Che” Guevara), under the iconic Korda image, in 2008 (Figure 4). The logo of the city government and the phrase “Rosario Ciudad Natal del
‘Che’ Guevara” give the location an official imprimatur and a link to other commemorative sites in the city. The red banner evokes socialism, but ironically the color scheme complements the logo of an insurance company, MAPFRE, which has offices on the ground floor. Just across the street, the “Che Guevara” Hostel, catering mainly to foreign backpackers, bears his logo even more conspicuously, on signs and banners (Figure 5).

**The Plaza**

Perhaps because the Casa Natal is problematic as a public space, the first official commemoration of Che’s birth in Rosario was made in 1997, at the Plaza de la Cooperación just two blocks away. There, a marble plaque dedicated in 1997 bears a stylized silhouette of the Korda Che and the inscription, “A few meters away from this plaza, Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, a Rosarino who fought for a more just and unified society, was born.” But the standout artwork in the Plaza is a large portrait of Che by the Argentinean artist Ricardo Carpani (Figure 6). In
this portrait, Che’s facial features are elaborately textured in shades of gray, as if buffed to a fine polish on glass, in contrast with the flatness of the ubiquitous Korda image. Carpani first painted this image not in Rosario, but in New York City in 1989, as part of a larger mural (since destroyed) depicting revolutionary heroes on the leftist Pathfinder Press Building (Kunzle 1997, p. 26). The portrait in the Rosario plaza was completed by others after Carpani’s death in 1997.

Most people, I think, do not find this tiny park very inviting or attractive. Over the years, I have seen it busy only at night, full of teenagers biding their time until the nearby nightclubs open. The Plaza takes on a different character at night: let’s just say it has lots of dark corners for doing things you wouldn’t want to be caught doing. What is alluring at night seems strange in the daylight. The Plaza has a peculiar angular geometry: the entrance and main axial walkways are oriented 45 degrees to the street, and diamond, pyramid, and “V” patterns abound, painted or formed with bricks (Figure 7). Oddly, there are sculptures of giant ants climbing the skeletal steel pyramid that marks the park entrance. Except at its edges, where it is landscaped with trees and shrubs, the Plaza is made of bricks and cement; this style, in Argentina, is called plaza seca, or “dry plaza.” Only Che’s portrait, the giant ants, and a tiled painting of the Virgin Mary break up the coldness and angularity of the space. One of my friends explained the origins of this strange space: a mayor, who had been installed by the military dictatorship, commissioned the Plaza in the early 1980s on the site of an old public market. The mayor happened to be a member of the Freemasons, and thus the Plaza reflects the distinctive aesthetic of this so-called “secret society.”

The Monumental Statue

So, since the Casa Natal resists recognition, and the Plaza de la Cooperación is somewhat bewildering, these places did not satisfy the desire to properly commemorate Che. The most recent monument to Che, which might turn out to be the most unambiguous and permanent memorial to him in Rosario, is located in Parque Yrigoyen, in the city’s vast, working-class Zona Sur. Here, a bronze statue by the Argentine sculptor Andrés Zerneri stands in a plaza that now officially bears Guevara’s name (Figures 8, 9). The location itself has no special significance in the life of Che, but the story of how the statue came to be there reveals a lot about the public affirmation of Che in Argentine society today. Zerneri conceptualized the work as “public” art in a very concrete way. Rather than accepting a commission from a private foundation or the government, Zerneri sought the collaboration of “the people” from the beginning of the project. He initiated a campaign for donations of old keys and other small pieces of brass, from all over Argentina, to melt down and forge the bronze statue in his studio in Buenos Aires. In just over a year...
he collected the three and a half tons of metal (“the equivalent of 75,000 door keys”) necessary for the 4-meter-high statue. Via the internet, donors got to vote on where the statue would stand, and “overwhelmingly” chose Rosario (Casey 2009, p. 156).

The dedication of the statue was synchronized with ceremonies celebrating what would have been Che’s eightieth birthday in June 2008. The hoopla that attended the transfer of the Che Guevara statue from Buenos Aires to the park in Rosario was, by far, the most widespread, jubilant, and rambunctious expression of admiration for Che in Argentina to that point. In Buenos Aires, Che’s statue was given a farewell parade. Bedecked in flowers and Argentine flags, held fast to the moving truck with orange canvas straps, Che’s statue was carried by his faithful attendants down monumental avenues and through historic plazas of the city. Instead of being transported by truck, as with most domestic goods, Che’s statue was lifted onto a boat at the port of Buenos Aires and shipped along the Paraná River to Rosario.

The reception at the port of Rosario, eagerly anticipated for days, was a display of political iconography, historical symbolism, and popular sentiment. Strapped to the deck, overlooking the bow, Che seemed to be captaining the boat, rather than being simply carried by it (La Capital 2008a). Probably some in the crowd were stirred by the memory of the Granma, the barely seaworthy yacht that Che, Fidel Castro, and other rebels sailed from Mexico to Cuba in 1956 to challenge the Batista regime (Figure 10). Spectators, holding up political party banners and mostly wearing the colors of Argentina or of the soccer club Rosario Central, initiated the parade through the city to the awaiting pedestal in Yrigoyen Park (Figure 11). For the next ten days, members of a socialist youth group kept vigil over the statue until its official dedication on his birthday (Juventud Guevarista de Rosario 2011).

The official act attracted living links to Guevara’s personal history, in particular his daughter, Aleida Guevara March, and his old friend Alberto Granado. At the dedication ceremony, Aleida spoke fondly of her father while condemning ongoing injustices in Argentine society. She and a few other dignitaries were allowed to tour the apartment where her father was born, and they dedicated the red banner marking the site (pers. comm., Sonia Pedrido, 2011).

Figure 9. Statue of Che in Parque Yrigoyen, with the old Central Córdoba railway station in the background. Photo courtesy of Cristian Bilbao.

Figure 10. Statue of Che arriving at the port of Rosario in June 2008. The sculptor, Andrés Zerneri, holds up a key to symbolize the thousands of keys and other donated pieces of brass that went into the statue. Photo courtesy of Juventud Guevarista de Rosario.
February 2011). Granado, Che’s companion on the famous 1952 tour of South America that inspired the 2004 film, “The Motorcycle Diaries,” also traveled from Cuba, where he had relocated from Argentina years ago. Representatives from left-wing organizations all over Latin America traveled to Rosario, which temporarily became the “world center” of Che’s eightieth birthday festivities. The fact that Rosario has a socialist mayor, albeit one who advocates a centrist version of socialism that Che himself might have scorned, surely helped to facilitate the organization of these official ceremonies.

Legacies of Authoritarianism and the Memory of Che

Reflecting on the recent acts of commemoration in Rosario, and the scant conspicuous opposition to them, led me to wonder: Why did it take so long? To really understand the long delay in recognizing Che in Rosario, we must examine political and cultural changes in Argentina over the last few decades. Since the return to civilian rule in 1983, Argentina has been dealing with the legacy of the Proceso, also known as the Dirty War. This was a campaign carried out by the military government of Argentina to rub out “subversive” elements of society. The middle class largely supported, or at least silently condoned, the suppression of armed rebels and urban guerrillas that destabilized Argentina in the early 1970s. But the list of government victims that were tortured, killed, or sent into exile would eventually include thousands of left-wing political figures, union leaders, student radicals, feminists, journalists, intellectuals, and artists. Most chillingly, many orphans of the “disappeared” were secretly adopted by friends and family of the military. In this repressive and conservative environment, “Che was totally off-limits” (Casey 2009, p. 140).

Many in Argentina, especially a conservative segment of the middle class, recall with trepidation the anarchy and insecurity of the guerrilla warfare of the 1970s. Older Rosarinos have vivid memories of bombings, armed robberies, kidnappings, and assassinations in the city during this period of political chaos. From their perspective, Che Guevara instigated and inspired armed revolution, not only through his words and deeds in life, but also in the way his image as revolutionary martyr was used after his death. To them, Che is no hero, but rather a deluded ideologue, murderer, and principal figure in the cycles of political violence that proliferated in Argentina (and other parts of Latin America) into the 1980s.

This anti-Guevara perspective has been advanced by influential intellectuals such as Carlos Alberto Montaner (2008), a Cuban exile, and Álvaro Vargas Llosa (2005), a Peruvian essayist and son of Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa. But in Argentina, both condemnation and celebration of Che Guevara were mostly sublimated, until quite recently, as part of a general self-censorship of discussion of the Dirty War. Despite well-known efforts to air grievances and clarify historical facts, such as Nunca Más, the official report on the Dirty War authored by the late Argentine writer Ernesto Sábató, in reality the political events of the 1970s and early 1980s caused such damage to the country’s psyche that most people simply did not want to talk about it. Even for those Argentines not explicitly opposed to Guevara’s politics, the legacy of state terror and repression had made them “fearful to admit their relationship” with Che (Casey 2009, p. 149). At the same time, Argentina’s political left, damaged and dismembered after the Dirty War, tended to disavow socialist policies and symbolic connections with the radical left as it sought a return to power. Personifying this trend, Carlos Menem squelched the left-wing elements of his own party, the Peronists, and instead put Argentina on the path towards pro-business, free-market reforms, known as neoliberalism. In this context of weakness on the left and the general unwillingness of Argentine society to deal frankly with the legacies of insurgency and state terror, there was no political space for commemorating Che Guevara.

Che’s Popular Revival

Che began to creep his way back into the consciousness of Rosarinos, and Argentines more generally, from the margins, through popular culture. Soccer, the national game, was instrumental in Che’s
eventual resurrection. As the geographer Christopher Gaffney (2008, p. 126) discusses, a soccer team’s youngest, most passionate fans, the team’s barra brava, invariably sit in the cheapest seats behind the goal. In this rowdy, noisy, and very masculine space, almost anything goes—short of cheering for the other team—so it is a space where the airing of subversive chants, songs, and images is not only acceptable, but de rigueur. In this “human tide,” carried on by youthful energy, the image of Che is commonplace. As Casey (2009, p. 165) described one soccer match in Buenos Aires:

“The jumping, singing, and chanting fans, all waving their arms in unison at the nonstop rhythm of drums, unite to form a single heaving mass of humanity, a living organism. And if you look closely enough, Che is there, deep inside it. Views of his face periodically flash from thousands of colored flags fluttering in the stands, or it stares out from bare chests and shoulders, where his image is tattooed alongside team crests.”

The fans who compose the barra brava are often among the poorest and most discontented of society. In the figure of Che, they find aliento, or encouragement, and, as writer Rubén Mira quoted in Casey (2009) puts it, the Argentine spirit of aguante, which connotes a “sense of dignity and inner strength in the face of hardship” (p. 167).

Although Che’s likeness and spirit is found among the passionate fans of many soccer teams in Argentina and other countries, he has a special yet disputed connection to Rosario. The city has two major rival teams, Rosario Central and Newell’s Old Boys. Dedication to one team, and hatred of the other, is formed at an early age. Supporters of Central have long held that the city is named, and its stadium is shaped, like a barca, or “bar.” Rosario Central fans defiantly adopted as their nickname, means something like “tuff-ruff” or “low-down, dirty dog.” Fans of Newell’s (known as leprosos, or “lepers”) wonder, indignantly, how someone who barely set foot in Rosario after his infancy could be considered a true fan of Central.

Under the weight of hostile rhetoric and name-calling, most online comments about the statue during inauguration festivities in 2008.

Arguably, the hottest controversies about Che Guevara in cyberspace relate not to his political ideas or deeds on the battlefield, but to his putative status as a canalla. This insulting term, which Rosario Central fans defiantly adopted as their nickname, means something like “tuff-ruff” or “low-down, dirty dog.” Fans of Newell’s (known as leprosos, or “lepers”) wonder, indignantly, how someone who barely set foot in Rosario after his infancy could be considered a true fan of Central. Simply being born there was a historical coincidence, but he chose to call himself a canalla, and by extension, a Rosarino.

Changing portrayals of Che in the popular media have also helped to soften his image and make it more socially acceptable. Since the 1990s Che Guevara has been present in Argentine rock music—for example, the band Resistencia Suburbana penned an ode to Che Guevara called “La unión verdadera” (“The True Union”)—but these musical representations of Che came from the social fringes, indeed from the same alienated youth who populate the cheap seats at soccer matches. What really transformed Che’s image, internationally and in Argentina, was the release of the film “The Motorcycle Diaries” in 2004. Based on his own, posthumously published memoirs, the movie depicts Guevara and his close friend Alberto Granado traveling across South America on their Norton motorcycle in 1952. As played by the Mexican actor Gael Garcia Bernal, Che is a quietly handsome, sensitive, and idealistic young doctor, struck by the social injustices he witnesses along the way. The trip serves as an epiphany and launches Che on his life mission as peripatetic revolutionary. But, crucially, in the movie we see Che before he became a hardened, war-tested guerrilla. Beautifully depicted tropical
landsakes and a gentle yet stirring musical score further emphasize the feeling of historical distance. Popular worldwide, the movie presented an “unknown side” of the famous personage, according to the Argentine newspaper El Clarín. As Granado told the paper, the film lowered Che from his mythic status, depicting him instead as a “person of flesh and bone, with virtues and defects” (Febre 2004).

The movie, along with Che’s connection to soccer and consumer culture, helped complete the domestication of Che’s image. On the heels of the social unrest, political turmoil, and state terror that culminated in the Dirty War, Che’s image as a revolutionary, willing to use violent means to achieve power, made him unacceptable. But the sensitive portrayal of the young Che, before revolution, made him seem harmless by comparison. Of course, many in Argentine society continued to cling to the more defiant and revolutionary image, but mainstream society now had another reference point, a different kind of Che that they could embrace, or at least tolerate.

Souvenirs of an Unfinished Revolution: Che Tourism

“The Motorcycle Diaries” undoubtedly helped accelerate another key trend: Che tourism. After Argentina’s economic crisis of 2001–2002 prompted a severe currency devaluation, the country became a popular tourist destination. One segment of the tourist market, predominantly youthful idealists, has sought to retrace the route of young Che’s motorcycle journey and visit other important sites of his youth. For its part, Rosario began to capitalize on Che seekers just as the city’s tourist trade was suddenly booming. Compared to Buenos Aires, Iguazu Falls, or Patagonia, Rosario was never a popular destination for tourists. Through the 1990s Rosario was a depressed city dealing with the lingering effects of deindustrialization: high unemployment, disused and outdated infrastructure, and rampant poverty. It was hard to picture this dilapidated inland port city becoming a major attraction. Then, in the last decade, a number of factors converged to spur tourism. The economic collapse of December 2001 produced a currency devaluation that lowered the cost for foreign visitors and increased internal demand, as fewer Argentines were able to travel abroad for vacations. Despite economic troubles, a boom in the soybean industry and the completion of a major bridge across the Paraná River have solidified Rosario’s role as a regional hub. Finally, the local government has made a concerted effort to promote tourism, particularly by rehabilitating the waterfront and filling it with cafés, bars, restaurants, and parks with views of the impressive Paraná River, wider here than the Mississippi at New Orleans. As a result, the number of rooms available in hotels and hostels has increased dramatically, and during important holidays there are often no vacancies, an occurrence almost unheard of a decade ago.

The image of Che has been an important part of the “branding” of Rosario as a tourist destination. The outside flap of the official tourist map issued by city features the Che Guevara statue alongside images of the new casino, the bridge over the Paraná River, and the city’s most well-known site, the Monumento a la Bandera, the massive monument to the Argentine flag (Figure 13). Dozens of hostels, catering especially to foreign backpackers, have sprung up in reconverted apartment buildings in the city center (including Hostel Guevara). There is also a brisk trade in Che-branded souvenirs that link him to everyday habits of Argentine life, such as postcard photographs of a bare-chested Che drinking yerba maté, the national drink, or a leather-bound yerba maté kit bearing his image (Figure 14). Recently, Rosario signed onto the national Ministry of Tourism’s project, “Los Caminos del Che” (“The Paths of Che”), which promotes Che-related destinations as points on a travel itinerary (La Capital 2009; Argentina, Ministerio de Turismo 2011). Rosario’s head of tourism, Héctor De Benedictis, has embellished Che’s biography somewhat to play up the city’s claim on him. As he told La Capital, “‘In Rosario Che had friends, girlfriends, lovers … he never disconnected himself from the city’ … And Rosario, for its part, never repudiated Che, a link that now opens up an opportunity ‘to reference itself as a city with a passion for politics’” (Dezorzi 2011). Thus the Che Guevara “brand” is so malleable that it can even be used to define the identity of the city—at least for the purposes of tourism.

Tourism promoters may want to treat political life simply as one attribute of a brand identity, but substantive political change—namely, a leftward lurch in national politics—is the other necessary ingredient, along with the domestication of Che’s image in popular culture and its rebranding for tourism, that make it permissible to commemorate Che in public spaces. The first decade of the 2000s witnessed the resurgence of left-wing populism throughout the continent, led by Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Evo Morales of Bolivia, and the Kirchners of Argentina. If one common thread unites them, it is confronting outside geopolitical and economic influence, usually attributed to U.S. imperialism. The new populists have pushed back against the agenda of globalization and free-market reform, which they believe was orchestrated by the U.S. and Europe. This is not merely a rhetorical maneuver: Néstor Kirchner, who assumed the Argentine presidency in 2003, stood up to the IMF and let Argentina default on its foreign debts. Meanwhile, the region’s leftist governments have pursued policies of mutual financial assistance, much of it derived from the great oil revenues that Chavez controls, to reduce the influence of the United States in Latin America’s economic policy. The imperious demeanor of George W. Bush and the widespread repudiation of U.S. military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan elevated anti-American sentiment to a fever pitch in a country already reeling from economic meltdown. Latin America’s New Left has been eager to embrace Che as a symbol of the struggle against yanqui imperialism, but with rhetoric mostly stripped of Guevara’s Marxist ideology.

Of course, not everyone in Rosario agrees with Che’s message. Soon after its opening, the Che Guevara Hostel was hit with fire from an air rifle, according to its owner (pers. comm. Sonia Pedriño, Feb. 2011). In January of 2011, the Che Guevara monument in Rosario was defaced with graffiti for at least the third time (Rosario3.com 2011). Reflecting the ideological roots of the controversy, the name “F. A. Hayek” (author of the Road to Serfdom, a foundational text for free-market proponents such as Margaret Thatcher) had been scrawled across an allegorical mural of the “open veins of Latin America,” a reference to a classic anti-imperialist tract by Eduardo Galeano (1971), which also happens to be Hugo Chávez’s favorite book. Members of a small libertarian political party claimed responsibility. As of June 2011,
the colorful murals, and the graffiti that defaced them, had been covered over with gray paint by city authorities, significantly reducing the attractiveness and overt political expression of the plaza.

Che in the Chatroom

In reality, most of the debate over Che’s memory does not take place in the public spaces that pay tribute to him. Instead, impassioned debates over the legacy of Che have shifted mainly to cyberspace, for example on the message board of La Capital or comments under YouTube videos. Here, Che’s detractors seem to outnumber his supporters. One commentator succinctly captured a widely-felt reaction to the arrival of Zerneri’s statue of Che in Rosario: “How shameful. The city has a monument to a murderer” (La Capital 2008a). Would it not be better to honor other local heroes, such as outstanding scientists and physicians, who really left their mark on the city? Others criticize the socialist economic program that Che helped to institute in Cuba, with many seeing parallels to the policies of the Kirchners’ Argentina.

Whether it is for or against Che, this genre of commentary revolves around grappling with the facts of Che’s life. In a sense, it is a continuation of the serious ideological debates that had such life-and-death consequences during the 1960s and 1970s. For these people, as William Faulkner put it in Requiem for a Nun, “The past is never dead. It is not even past.” But if such attitudes were still dominant, then it is unlikely that Che would be commemorated as he has been in Rosario. Instead, most Rosarinos—at least, the ones who aren’t completely indifferent to the whole matter—have reached an accommodation with Che as a historical figure. To recognize his fame, and Rosario’s share of it, does not necessarily imply condoning his actions. Such an attitude reflects an increasing tolerance in Argentina’s political culture, a healthy sign of a maturing democracy. Many view the matter with a postmodern sensibility of ironic detachment, understanding that it is now impossible to separate Che as a legend, icon, or logo from the facts of his life. Still others observe the Che-mania in Rosario with profound cynicism. As one successful young entrepreneur from Rosario told me, the city’s various Che-related sites are just “points of sale”

Figure 13. Monumento a la Bandera (Monument to the Argentine Flag), which is Rosario’s most-visited tourist attraction.

Figure 14. Yerba maté carrying case featuring the iconic Korda image of Che, Argentine flag, and script “Rosario,” in a shop window.
manufactured by tourism promoters, to stroke the “rebellious” self-image of middle-class dilettantes, from Argentina and abroad.

The Che Legacy

In any event, the memory of Che Guevara is becoming an accepted part of the urban landscape of Rosario. In 2008, a medical clinic bearing his name opened up in the outskirts of Rosario, surrounded by the villas miserias or slums that dominate the area. In 2010, a community radio station, “Radio Popular Che Guevara” began broadcasting from Rosario, with the mission of “counteracting the bourgeois disinformation machine.” Around the same time, the National University of Rosario inaugurated the Che Guevara Center for Latin American Studies, part of a network of leftist academic centers at Argentine universities. Even the new superhighway from Rosario to Córdoba officially bears his name, though it is not in common usage. And, the city recently dedicated a commemorative plaque in the Rose Garden of Parque Independencia, a spot whose fame rests on the claim that Guevara and Granado were photographed there as they set off on their motorcycle journey (La Capital 2011). This latest act suggests that the line between life and art is blurred completely when it comes to Che—the site seems to commemorate a photograph capturing a journey made famous by a movie—and perhaps validates the notion that tourism promoters go to great lengths to invent new “points of sale” for Che seekers.

Although he still sparks controversy and debate, Che Guevara has been claimed as a “native son” of Rosario. As we have seen, the acknowledgement and celebration of Che required the domestication of his image through popular culture, an active rebranding effort by the local tourism industry, and substantive political change, especially the rise of the new Latin American left and a more open reckoning with the legacies of dictatorship. Commemorating Che, in permanent and conspicuous ways, in places where he actually posed for photographs or nestled in his crib, are part of the continuous process of remaking Che’s image and meaning. Domesticating Che implies not only softening—what detractors would call a selective memory that ignores the worst of Che as a revolutionary and a guerrilla—but also lowering him from the realm of icons and legends to the place of the ordinary, everyday Rosario: the one who drinks yerba maté, loves his favorite soccer team, admires his mother, and goes on youthful adventures. He was a man of “flesh and bone,” as Granado said.

But then again, Che was no ordinary person. Jean-Paul Sartre, no less, called him “The most complete man of his age: he lived his words, spoke his own actions, and his story and the story of the world ran parallel.” And of course, in death his legend has grown to such proportions that the actual facts of his life sometimes seem beside the point. As Michael Casey (2009) has argued, Che has become a global “brand,” and like all great brands, it is ubiquitous and instantly recognizable; creates a strong, emotional bond with the consumer; and is infinitely pliable, allowing people to find whatever meaning they want within it. Yet, it would be a mistake to say that Che has become merely a consumer icon, drained of all political meaning. Even to those who have only hazy knowledge of his biography, Che is a symbol of speaking truth to power, standing up for one’s convictions, and fighting social injustice. It is the power of these abstract and timeless ideas, ironically, that make the concrete acts of remembrance and pilgrimage so important to so many people.

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