David Kunzle, *CHESUCRISTO: The Fusion in Image and Word of Che Guevara and Jesus Christ* (De Gruyter, 2016)

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In February 2018 the Center for the Arts and Religion at the Graduate Theological Union (a consortium of eight private independent American theological schools) near the University of California, Berkeley, mounted a powerful exhibition, ‘Religion and Resistance’. In the exhibition catalogue, the gallery director Elizabeth S. Peña noted that: ‘We consider religion as a locus of dissent and an impetus for collective action.’ Two of the posters that were on display supporting this thesis were from Cuba, a Latin American country with a deep Catholic history (although it is currently the least Catholic country in Latin America) and a strong international presence as an agitator for a better world.

The relationship between religion and resistance warrants more examination. Despite the fact that Che Guevara (born in Argentina, but forever associated with the Cuban revolution and beyond) was an atheist, David Kunzle’s book offers a definitive examination of the symbolic and iconic connections between the two historic figures. Kunzle, an eclectic scholar (with interests ranging from Victorian fashion to nineteenth century comic strips to seventeenth century Flemish painting), first broached this approach when he curated the 1997/98 exhibition ‘Che Guevara: Icon, Myth, and Message’ at the University of California, Los Angeles’s Fowler Museum of Cultural History. In the catalogue for that exhibition, Kunzle’s chapter ‘Chesucristo: The Christification of Che’ opens by pointing out that:

> From the perspective of historical probability, as opposed to millennial myth, there are more similarities between Ernest Che Guevara and Jesus Christ, and between Latin America in the twentieth century and Galilee in the first century, than conventional (Christian) scholarship would allow.

Other portions of the Los Angeles exhibition further explored this relationship, but this was just an early taste of the breadth of knowledge and depth of analysis Kunzle brings to the current volume. In this most recent publication, he carves out a very specific turf; he explains in the preface:

> This is not a biography of either Che or Jesus; rather, it is a highly selective biography of the two myths about them and a considerable iconography joining them. As it seeks to modify the ideal and unhistorical view of the God-man Jesus, it tends to bring into being an ideal supra-historical man-God Che. This will worry some Che scholars...
Chesucristo is lavishly illustrated (with 257 illustrations, to be precise), but it is not limited to visual imagery. Kunzle draws on examples from film, literature and poetry. He even devotes an entire chapter to the parallels between text from the Gospels and instances connected with Che – such as, for example, the 39th verse of the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament, commonly referred to as ‘turning the other cheek’. Che, quoting the Cuban patriot José Martí in 1969, said ‘A real man should feel on his own cheek the blow given to another man’s cheek’.

But it is the images – photos, posters, paintings, stencils, sculpture, murals, billboards, even tattoos – that are the most prolific cultural virus of the spirit of Che Guevara, and they make up the bulk of this extraordinary volume. For example, Kunzle examines in great detail what he calls the ‘Korda matrix’, the instantly identifiable portrait that, reduced to a black-and-white graphic, is instantly recognised the world over.

The original photograph was taken by Korda, whose real name was Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez (1928–2001), on 4 March 1960. Korda was at an event honouring victims of a sabotage explosion of a French freighter in Cuba and attended by various luminaries, including Fidel Castro, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. At the time, Che was Cuba’s Minister of Industries. It was a quick job for Korda (he only snapped off two photos) and the image wasn’t used for seven years. But sometime in May or June of 1967, when Che was in Bolivia trying to rouse a local revolutionary movement, Korda gave a print to the leftist Italian publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, who published a bare poster – just the photo, without any text. After Che was killed in Bolivia on October 8/9, 1967, Korda’s photo (by now titled Guerrillero heróico) was used for numerous public displays. Soon afterwards, the photograph was simplified into a high contrast image poster by the artist Niko (Antonio Pérez González). Niko kept the beret with the distorted four-pointed star, assembled a collage of seven of the portraits, and added the famous phrase ‘Hasta la victoria, siempre!’ (Ever onward to victory). It was published by the Cuban Communist Party propaganda department as a large screen print.
The simplified, stylised image took off like wildfire, and variants can be found all over the world. This example is one of many instances where Kunzle draws on a unique knowledge of Eurocentric art historical practices and specific instances of the Che/Christ combo throughout Latin America. This book’s melding of the two is what makes it unique, and offers a model of what future cultural histories might consider.

But why Che? Latin America has certainly had its share of activist clergy. Perhaps the best known is Oscar Romero, the fourth Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador during El Salvador’s revolution. Devoted to supporting the poor and calling out social injustice, Romero was assassinated while offering Mass in 1980. Camilo Torres (1929–1966) was a Columbian socialist and Catholic priest killed on his first armed contact as a revolutionary. Torres famously said: ‘If Jesus were alive today, He would be a guerrillero.’ But none of these figures have attained the profound elevation to icon that Che Guevara did, especially considering his secular position.

Kunzle makes provocative suggestions as to why Che is a special case. He delves into many aspects of this investigation, including the evolution of liberation theology, examples of ‘miracles’, and portrayals of the dead body of Che in art. One chapter is devoted to examining the shared symbology of Jesus and Che, such as the star/halo, the Shroud of Turin, even the use of flowers and birds. The book also reflects on the commercialisation of Che and the degree to which his message has become diluted and appropriated, not unlike the messaging of Jesus Christ.
Kunzle’s *Chesucristo* is a masterwork, relevant to scholars of Latin American revolutionary movements as well as those interested in the boundaries of liberation theology. Art historians will also appreciate the exhaustive pursuit of the imagistic connection offered by Kunzle’s superb research and analysis.

**Alfredo Rostgaard, 1969, Untitled (generally referred to as Cristo guerrillero). Poster for the Organization in Solidarity with the People of Africa, Asia and Latin America (OSPAAAL, Havana, Cuba). Image courtesy of the author.**

**Lincoln Cushing** is an archivist and author. His books include ¡Revolución! Cuban Poster Art (Chronicle Books, 2003), *Visions of Peace & Justice - San Francisco Bay Area 1947–2007: Over 30 years of Political Posters from the Archives of Inkworks Press* (2007) and (with Timothy Drescher) *Agitate! Educate! Organize! American Labor Posters* (ILR Press, 2009). He curated the 2012 ’All of Us or None: Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area’ exhibition at the Oakland Museum of California, and continues to catalogue the collection. His research and publishing projects can be seen at Docs Populi – Documents for the Public: [www.docspopuli.org](http://www.docspopuli.org)