

**Letters from the New World
(South Africa) #5**

**Che Guevara vs. Paul Theroux on
Africa**

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At an airport bookshop I recently saw a strange paperback called **The African Dream**, purporting to be **Che Guevara's Congo diary**. It had an odd cover and an odd imprint and I took it as a skit. Imagine, pretending that history's most public revolutionary could have had a secret life in Africa, written up but then hidden away for forty years. Who were they kidding?

My flight to Kampala was called. I took up **Paul Theroux's new odyssey on Africa** and got in the queue to pay for it. At the counter, in mid purchase, annoying the people behind, a whim overtook me. What was this nonsense about Che and Africa? I ran to grab it.

Two hours later **my eyelids were heavy with Theroux**. It was an okay book, but **over-familiar**. Once again, I felt, the sleepwalk about Africa. Treatment of it was so orthodox; one-dimensional: **plucky poor continent trails behind the march of nations**.

Were we horses in blinkers, seeing only centre-field? Africa is about extremes, both extremes. **The warm acceptance of a Kampala bus against the social iceberg of a London train is not a trailing-behind, it's a far-ahead**. But when public policy turns farms that provided crops and livelihoods into wastelands, that is not trailing behind either. It's sabotage, destruction by edict.

In Theroux, true to My Trip To Africa fashion, **the glory was half recognised and the shambles half acknowledged**. A new view was surely being born somewhere, to break logjams and shed blinkers, but so far the new view was behind a bush, sensed but not seen.

Putting Theroux in the seat pocket I encountered my other purchase, and took it up for a five-minute unravelling before falling asleep.

When we landed I was 200% awake and could not stop reading, even in the passport queue with heatsweat dripping on Che's words.

Che's African Dream is for real, and was suppressed. That's because Che does not say of Africa what a good communist is meant to say, i.e., forward the oppressed. **He says, in 244 pages: this place is hopeless beyond belief.**

In due course the book will surely become an exhibit in re: understanding Africa. When it does, I foresee two consequences. **One, an end to the radical-chic view of Che, replaced by deep respect.** Two, a gear-change in thinking on Africa. Today's issues, like colour coding and alien disposal, will be in Comedy Showcase. **All hands will be on deck to get Joe Africa actually moving forward rather than being perpetually assured that he should be moving forward.**

But due course is not tomorrow. This exhibit is too sore to behold, as yet. Finishing Che in the Speke Hotel that night, I thought that there'd be plays and movies based on his tale, in years ahead, well ahead, when Africa had become **more interested in removing the causes of its inferiority complex than in denying the effects.**



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