

The New Criterion

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Sean Penn, journalist

by Michael Weiss

Well, sometimes it really is just too easy, isn't it? Much has been said about Sean Penn's latest cover story for *The Nation* in which he purports to offer a fair and balanced perspective on the regimes of Hugo Chavez and Raul Castro. It would be slightly unfair to characterize his piece as pure palace stenography in the ignoble traditions of Sidney and Beatrice Webb and Walter Duranty, if only because, amidst the tea and sympathy and shared laughter with his fraternal junist and bloviating Bolivarian hosts, Penn does actually get around to asking a tough question or two about human rights abuses. (These are followed, naturally, by claims of their being "exaggerated" in the American press, and then by recourse to moral equivalence about our own checkered record at Guantanamo Bay.)

Jamie Kirchick of the *New Republic* (with whom I'm friends) has a good video critique of the essay posted at TNR's The Plank, pointing to one of its central and tragic ironies. Penn is now starring in the critically acclaimed film *Milk*, which is a biopic of the first openly gay elected official Harvey Milk, and the unquestionably gifted actor is poised to receive an Oscar nomination for his performance as well as plaudits from the American gay community. Yet here is he is traipsing through his post-revolutionary idyll on an island nation that, since its current government came into existence, has imprisoned and murdered homosexuals for being homosexuals.

You won't find much of that, I bet, in another Hollywood production set to appear in theatres soon--the Sundance favorite *Che*, directed by Steven Soderbergh and starring Benicio Del Toro as every poseur Marxist college student's favorite silkscreen t-shirt icon. Having not seen *Che*, I can't in good conscience claim that it's a hagiography, but it does tell somewhat against its dispassionate portrayal of history that the Havana brass have prescreened it and declared it *sin problemas*. (No such luck for *Before Night Falls*, directed by Julian Schnabel -- a man who hates tyranny as much as crockery -- and starring Javier Bardem as a gay poet who knew the perils of inhabiting both those identities in a country with such a reputedly bang-up education system.)

For a healthier side dish to Penn's overcooked and spoiled ham, be sure to read the various Web letters mailed in about it, which *The Nation*, to its credit saw fit to publish. Many are from former residents of Venezuela and Cuba, quick to reaffirm the conventional wisdom not about trade embargoes or missile crises but that ever-relevant concept of limousine liberalism.

My favorite so far comes from an El Salvadoran who reminds us that Penn's previous fact-finding sojourns to Iraq and Iran ended badly, and that as a foreign correspondent, Penn's sense of humor about himself is as healthy as that of his be-medalled subjects:

Journalists don't receive the kind of VIP treatment you received in Venezuela and Cuba--*especially* not in those countries. Journalists talk to people other than comandantes and presidents, and that makes them very suspicious to your friends Castro and Chávez.

There is something you obviously share with your friend Hugo: a deeply rooted allergy to criticism. When the paper that gave you the opportunity to write about your trips to Iraq and Iran, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, published an ironic piece about celebrities like you making fools of themselves by palling around with dictators and operetta presidents, you resigned from the paper. Which probably wasn't such a bad idea, if it meant resigning from journalism altogether...

But you just couldn't resist.

Another trip into the fascinating and exclusive world of "revolutionary" leaders in need of publicity. Writing it all down for *The Nation*, without even talking to the people in Cuba and Venezuela who think of your friends as the opposite of revolutionaries.

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When you resigned from the *Chronicle* calling it an "increasingly lamebrain paper," Phil Bronstein, the paper's chief editor--himself a veteran foreign correspondent who during the Salvadoran war wrote some of the best and most courageous investigative articles about human rights violations by the Salvadoran government--commented: "Sean is a great actor and a great director." Which reads, "He is a lousy reporter anyway." I fully subscribe to his opinion.