Instead of making speeches on the street and marching in unity with our comrades, we post pictures of ourselves with the powerful, famous, or merely notorious and ask our friends to admire the social standing these pictures represent.

It’s not what you know, goes the old observation about politics, but who you know. It’s so well accepted here in Washington that most of my friends and colleagues decorate their offices with a wall of photographs that advertise their briefest encounters with the famous, the notorious, or those at least somewhat recognizable. Such displays are so common that even the Chinese restaurant near the IEEE Computer Society office has one.

I’ve never found these displays that impressive. Granted, I was surprised that the host at the Golden Dragon had met both Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Sir Mick Jagger, but that knowledge didn’t change my opinion of his steamed dumplings.

I recently discovered a power wall at a well-known computer laboratory. The photographs were yellow and faded but still recognizable. They showed the famous and notorious who had come to view the new computing technology and proclaim it the vanguard of the future—a young Henry Kissinger, a withered Douglas MacArthur, Queen Elizabeth II, Grace Kelly, and Ernesto “Che” Guevara, the latter pointing at the control panel of a computer that might have been an IBM 1401.

The only surprising aspect of the Che photo was the fact that he looked exactly like all the posters and T-shirts that bear his image—field beret, neat mustache and beard, chiseled face. Some might think it surprising that he was holding a deck of punched cards instead of an assault rifle, but Guevara was deeply interested in technology. He was a physician and the first minister of industries under the revolutionary government.

Like the leaders of many developing countries, Guevara and the other Cuban revolutionaries saw the computer as a means of expanding production, developing knowledge, and accumulating national wealth. “Without an adequate technological education, development is retarded,” Guevara wrote shortly after visiting that laboratory. Cuba “must correct the inferiority that comes from our lack of knowledge.”

Yet Guevara, like virtually all Communist leaders (as well as more than a few devout capitalists), didn’t see any truly revolutionary aspect to the computer. They believed that the computer would make industry more productive but it would not alter social structure. Karl Marx had argued that capital, not machinery, structured society. If machines altered society, they produced changes that were “purely technical,” and allowed capitalists to squeeze more labor out of the working classes.

Guevara didn’t live to see all the changes that we’ve labeled as computer revolutions, but he would have probably dismissed them all. Mini-computers, personal computers, software, the Internet—to him, none of these would change the social fabric.

It’s less clear that he could have dismissed the changes that we’ve seen in the past decade, changes that have started to divide the world by interest rather than geography. With the new tools of social computing, we can now associate with those who share common interests, common goals, or common activities rather than restrict our social contacts merely to those who live nearby. It’s a process that Guevara or even Marx would have found intriguing, as it seems to promote a new form of class consciousness. However, they also would likely have been mystified by how we express that consciousness. Instead of marching in unity with our comrades, we post pictures of ourselves (and our cats) with the powerful, famous, or merely notorious, and claim that these pictures represent a new social status. Do these pictures, Marx might have asked, represent a new way of exerting the force of the working class, or are they merely the trappings of power?

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