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Cuba and the Pope: Why Cuba's quiet wealth is so needed

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The Pope, speaking to Congress, quoted Thomas Merton, Trappist monk. It was to preface remarks on Cuba. He might have pushed the connection further. Merton said he lived enslaved by his own desires and fears. José Martí, Cuban independence leader, placed a similar insight at the centre of his revolution. It is about the nature of freedom, and science. Martí was concerned, for the sake of radical politics, with how to think.

Two hundred years ago, countering European ideas, an intense debate in Cuba addressed the issue. Armando Hart, who led Cuba's literacy campaign, unmatched in the world, says no one who disregards the "Cuban philosophical polemic", 1838-40, understands the Cuban Revolution.¹ This will surprise some. Cuba is much studied but not for its ideas, and certainly not for ideas about how to think creatively. It should be.

1.

Since the 1960s, the "creativity industry" in North America has urged us "outside the box". Cuban philosopher, Félix Varela, in 1817, before Martí and before Marx, cared about boxes. He took the question to be about the nature of thought, which depends upon universals.² He noticed that the vehicles for all thought, general categories, are social. We make use of them but we do not create them, at least not alone.

Science depends upon universals. So does individual reasoning, day by day. North American philosophers know this. But they ignore political implications. The "Cuban polemicists" did not. Cuba in the 1830s was threatened by four global institutions: Spain took Cuba to define its "national integrity"; slavery was a "necessary evil"; the US considered Cuba its manifest destiny; and England was gaining influence in the Caribbean. All four implied submission for Cuba.

Varela and José de la Luz y Caballero asked how to "*vivir de si, ver y actuar por si*" (live from oneself, see and act for oneself).³ They knew imperialism and its consequences. So they asked how to *discover* more adequate universals: "Human" and "freedom" were cases in point. They were liberals who examined the nature of knowledge. Knowing the role of social practises, they argued that creative thinking, free of the dehumanizing consequences of imperialism, required political struggle.

Historians credit Varela and Luz with teaching Cubans how to think. Their work was so unEuropean that it was missed entirely by Medardo Vitier who wrote the first Cuban intellectual history in 1938.⁴ Vitier thought Cuban ideas had always had foreign roots, as was true in his time when Cuba was, in effect, a US colony. In the 1950s, with the help of UNESCO, nineteenth century Cuban philosophy – including Martí's work - began to be recovered. Cuba's "battle for ideas" was reinvigorated.

2

It is about the nature of ideas. Tariq Ali suggests we think as we do because of "pressures and processes of everyday life as experienced within the specific social structures of a dominant counter- revolutionary

state and its allies".⁵ North American philosophers agree but leave out the counter-revolutions. Counter revolutions implies revolutions and anyone talking about revolutions, as Ali notes, is "living in the past".

Che Guevara knew the dependence of ideas upon political realities. In 1961, he headed Cuba's delegation to the Inter- American Economics and Social Council of the Organization of American States in Punta del Este, Uruguay. He declared the conference political, not economic. He cited President Kennedy's claim about "free nations [meeting] the human and material needs of the modern world".⁶ The conference was political because "free nations" was defined by (imperialistic) "pressures and processes", not by argument.

The US was proposing the Alliance for Progress, which offered money for sewers, not for industrialization: "Planning for the gentlemen experts is the planning of latrines", Guevara noted. "Latrinocracy", as he called it, indicated Latin Americans were not included in the "human" part of human development. It is as if "your leg is being pulled", he told the delegates, proceeding to name "pressures and processes" informing the US plan and making it credible (to some).

Noam Chomsky points out, as he did again recently, that although George Orwell is known for criticizing the Soviet Union, the original preface of *Animal Farm* is about England.⁷ Public opinion, Orwell argues, damages free thought and expression more than authoritarian government. Thus, those formed in "good schools" end up with fewer options: Precisely because of their formation, they are less able to imagine, let alone live, lifestyles not dictated by "pressures and processes".

3.

The polemicists took this further. Social orthodoxies constrain individual imagination but so also do global structures: The division of the world – by imperialism – into persons and non-persons made human liberation, at least for Latin Americans, hard to expect. But it also promoted a view of human beings, including a view about freedom, which made human liberation, once expected, hard to know.⁸

It had to do with living "from the inside", a view thoroughly challenged by Merton. The polemicists argued that the idea that freedom is, roughly, the exercise of choice defends the (global) status quo. For, if we believe we think freely from the inside, we ignore the "outside" informing beliefs and desires, limiting imagination, as Orwell argued. Martí later warned Latin Americans not to be "slaves of Liberty" enticed by an "alter of seductive words".

"Seductive words" needed to be challenged, for the sake of independence, and for individuals' freedom of enquiry. Varela famously said "*patria es humanidad*" (the homeland is humanity), meaning that *knowing* humanness, including our own, depends upon local reality.⁹ He wasn't saying "think globally, act locally". The point was different. It "has to do with foundations for universalism, for species consciousness".¹⁰ It had to do with what Karl Marx called essential human capacities.

We know ourselves through knowing others: "Through the wonderful compensation of nature", Martí wrote, "whoever gives of himself grows".¹¹ And it is also how we get more adequate ideas. For Marx, human beings are "herd animals" because of how we think, not because we live communally: "The human being is in the most literal sense a political animal, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal that can individuate itself only in the midst of society".¹²

There is no marketplace of ideas, as liberals like to claim. Concepts gain content from social practises, and social practises sometimes need to be created for the sake of better ideas. Some bad ideas go unquestioned because of trends. Better ideas are inconceivable because of trends.

4.

Social critics tell us trends in North America are toward “higher selfishness”: We want life that is “experientially diverse, emotionally enriching, self- esteem boosting, perpetually challenging and eternally edifying”.¹³ The expectation, unexamined, is that freedom is about *having* – experiences, travel, relationships, the more the better. What matters is choice. “Pressures and processes”, and the options they rule out, are irrelevant, as long as we can choose.

Yet they are relevant to envisioning a better world, or even just to detecting historical resources. Argentinian president, Cristina Fernández, at the 7th Summit of the Americas, described Cuban history as morally unprecedented. Last year, for example, *The Wall Street Journal* reported: “Few have heeded the call [to fight Ebola], but one country has responded in strength: Cuba.” Cuba sent more than 450 doctors and nurses, chosen from over 15,000 volunteers, by far the largest medical mission of any country.

But Cuba’s history of internationalism is disregarded, including by development philosophers interested in conceptions of human well-being. It is not for disinterest, or even the Cold War. It is implausibility. We learn about Cubans in Sierra Leone, or Haiti, and expect an alternative explanation. We believe in gravity even when objects fail to fall. Likewise, we expect nations (and individuals) to be narrowly self-interested even when evidence shows us counter-examples.

This is how reasoning works. We pursue evidence for events considered plausible and when events are unexpected, given background beliefs, we explain them away, or just ignore them. It means creativity – offering genuinely more workable options for human development – requires changing conditions, including individual lives. The early Cuban activists knew this long before North American philosophers did, and they took the insight seriously in the independence struggle.

Hence, the significance of the Cuban polemic for the Cuban Revolution. Martí’s independence war, aiming to liberate Latin America was a “revolution in thinking”, urging a “new way of living”.¹⁴ According to Fina García, Martí was not a “great man” in the sense of a Bolívar or a Sarmiento— that is, politically accomplished. Instead, “The radical difference between Martí and other liberators is his commitment to double redemption, personal and political”.¹⁵

It was not about morality, but about knowing the way forward. The polemicists argued for curriculum reform. Aiming for liberation from imperialism, they argued that students should learn philosophy. This may seem odd. But they did not conceive of philosophy as we do today, removed from politics, and even life. They wanted students to think philosophically in order to identify and revise the universals they depended upon, especially for knowing their own human dignity.

For Martí, as for many Eastern philosophers, wisdom that challenges convention comes only from what is felt, and from what is lived. Merton thought the same, and lived in silence. They both held that freedom, which requires understanding, depends upon sensitivity and humility. For, it is not just knowledge that promotes understanding: the capacity to respond to beauty - in ideas, people or events – is often how we know the unexpected. This may, in a dehumanizing world, be human beings, and humanness.

5.

Freedom, then, has more to do with *being*, than having. Radical reconceptualization, even in science, is dependent upon circumstances and conditions, sometimes including self-conception. The Pope was right to quote Merton, who warned that the European “thingish” self, independent and bent on “total activity”, lives life as an “artificial charade”.¹⁶ Cubans in the 1830s had no role in the artificial charade that was being called “freedom”. They rejected the ideas that made it believable. Through their little recognized battle for ideas, they have been doing so ever since.

Some worry that, with normalization, fewer Cubans will follow Martí. They miss the point of the Cuban philosophical polemic. It is not a matter of numbers. Even if few live differently – and 15,000 Cuban medical workers did so last year – the example is there to be known by others, and lived. The “higher selfishness” view disallows creativity, at least regarding how to live, and to know oneself, as a human being. Cuba’s quiet philosophical wealth, centuries old, has less to do with the message itself, which is indeed urgent, than with how it is known, by living.

Endnotes

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4 Conde 2000: 9– 10.

5 Ali, Tariq, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of hope* (New York: Verso Press,2006) 220

6 Guevara, Che,"The OAS conference at Punta del Este", in David Deutschman (Ed.), *The Che Guevara Reader: Writings on guerilla strategy, politics and revolution* (New York: Ocean Press, 1997) 219

7 *Democracy Now!* (September 2015)

8 Hart, 2006, 129-44.

9 Conde, 2000, 30

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