

90 Years After Che Guevara's Birth

By [Prof Susan Babbitt](#)

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Last week was the 90th anniversary of Che Guevara's birth. He was a revolutionary and a doctor. Most importantly, he was a philosopher. He had ideas, needed today. Che argued with the Soviets about human motivation. He said human beings are not motivated by televisions and cars, not for what matters.

Capitalist economists say he was right, although he doesn't get credit. 1 For simple, uninteresting challenges, we act for gain. But for tasks of sacrifice, discovery and creation, material gain is often irrelevant. Moral incentives, Che said, are what drive us to change the world.

He meant "moral" in a broader sense than mere cultivation of virtue. He meant experiencing growth as a human being: realizing essentially human capacities, emotional and intellectual.

European philosophers had a silly view about straight lines. They said reason depend upon ends: Know what you want and find ways to get it. Some even say you can't live without ends: something to look forward to. They call it hope.

I wrote a doctoral dissertation on this view, called "instrumental rationality". It wasn't because I was interested in it. I wanted to know why academic philosophers liked it. It was really the only view out there, in analytic philosophy.

It rules out discovery, the kind Che knew was necessary for anti-imperialists - discovery of humanness.

I thought about Che when I read Ramzy Baroud's powerful book, *The Last Earth: A Palestinian Story* (Pluto 2018). The book is personal stories of catastrophe, by generations of Palestinians, in the Middle East and abroad. Joe Catron is the only non-Palestinian in the book. In a crucial way, his story is central.

Joe is from Hopewell, Virginia. He discovers that the Palestinians' struggle is his. He goes to Gaza for a few days and stays years. He stays through two wars. Death hangs over Joe like it hangs over Gazans. But Joe feels alive. He learns that it is not *his* death he cares about.

As a human shield at the El-Wafa Medical Rehabilitation centre, with 12 critical patients who can't be moved, bombarded for days, Joe Catron goes from being "an activist with many questions and few answers to ... a man, still with few answers but with a clear sense of a calling".

It wasn't an end he'd dreamed up back in Hopewell, and then set out to achieve, following a plan. No straight lines explain the relevance and depth of what Joe understands and acquires in Gaza. As he describes it, what happens to him in Gaza is, quite simply, friendship.

It changes him. It is moral incentive. When Che refers to *el hombre nuevo* (the new person), he means, in part at least, what happens to Joe: awareness of dependence on others, and direction based on that dependence. Joe doesn't collect information about tunnels, political groups and strategies, as other foreigners in Gaza were doing. His "clear sense of a calling" is the person he becomes.

A recent best-seller tells us to abandon self-help books and read novels. ² The author is interviewed around the world. Such a sensation shows how desperately the North needs ideas from the South and East: more sensible, naturalistic ones. The self-help industry is all about straight lines. They don't notice that this is so. There are no straight lines in nature.

We can learn this from good literature. True. Or we can learn it from life. Che did. So did Joe Catron. They knew it because they respected life, *others'* lives. They wanted to know them.

And that's been the message of countless wise philosophers, from across the globe, and throughout the ages, including Che, José Martí, Marx, Lenin, the Buddha. They didn't tell us *not* to bother with straight lines. The idea never occurred to them in the first place. It doesn't make sense. European liberals *invented* that unrealistic idea.

Brilliant Cuban politician and academic, Raúl Roa, in 1953, opens his *Viento Sur* (*Southern Wind*) with an echo of Marx's "A specter is haunting Europe": "A wind blows in the south", Roa writes. No straight lines, no formulae, no pills can save us from existential complexity: insecure, decaying, contradictory.

But we can face that reality, with *conciencia* (awareness). It is eminently more interesting, and motivating.

Che told medical students in 1960:

"If we all use the new weapon of solidarity ... then the only thing left for us is to know the daily stretch of the road and to take it. Nobody can point out that stretch; that stretch in the personal road of each individual; it is what he will do every day, what he will gain from his individual experience ... dedicated to the people's well-being." ³

Why is it considered a new insight that we should learn to feel - through literature, for instance - rather than seek out a quick fix for our human condition? Fidel Castro said in Caracas in 1998,

"They discovered 'smart weapons' but we discovered something more powerful: that people think and feel".

It's not trivial. The *viento sur* is more useful than yet another self-help book, even if it tells us to read novels. If we know the world, that is, if we discover what we did not know before,

and if we learn how to live well in that world, humanly, it is because of capacity for connection, not because we reason in lines: *el hombre nuevo*. If we believe in science, there's no other way.

It's why Ana Belén Montes needs to be known *now*. She is a threat to what Che called "the myth of the self-made man". She knows moral incentive. Ana is *still* silenced in a US jail. 4

Please sign petition [here](#).

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Susan Babbitt is author of Humanism and Embodiment (Bloomsbury 2014). She is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Notes

1. Pink, Dan (2010). The surprising truth about motivation. RSA Animate.
2. Svend Brinkman, *Stand firm* (Polity 2017)
3. Speech to medical students and health workers. In David Deutschman (Ed.), *The Che Guevara Reader* (NY: Ocean Press, 1997) 104
4. <http://www.prolibertad.org/ana-belen-montes>. For more information, write to sarahnes@cubarte.cult.cu or cincoheroes@listas.cujae.edu.cu

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