

# Anarchism, A False Hope? Nineteenth Century Cuban Independistas Explain

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Theme: [History](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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*Around the globe, activists are turning to Emma Goldman and Alexeyevich Kropotkin. The word anarchy swims through twitter feeds and Facebook shares. "Anarchy" means unmediated people power. It means people divesting from hierarchical systems.*

Or so we are told.

The slogan – and it is a slogan – is that there is power within each person to choose their own destiny. This power has supposedly begun to awaken from a long slumber.

This power is not waking because it doesn't exist, at least not as described. A false idea about individual freedom has been around for a long time. It's been known to be false for just as long.

First point: Anarchism cannot ground resistance to oppressive hierarchies, effectively, because individuals' most intimate thinking expresses such hierarchies. This was known to independence activists in Cuba 200 years ago.

They noticed a simple fact about thinking. It is simple on the face of it, but profound in its implications, politically, at least currently, with the dominance of liberalism, libertarian and anarchist tendencies.

Lenin was aware of this truth. He cited it explicitly, although much later than José de la Luz y Caballero and Félix Varela in Cuba in the early nineteenth century.

It goes like this: All thinking, even the supposedly most private, depends upon universals. Every entity – thing, event, or being – is at the same time a universal, a *kind* of entity. Universals are general terms like "love", "freedom", and "tree". Your thinking may be private, but universals are social. They are shared.

Lenin knew this. He said people are confused about freedom because they ignore their dependence *for thinking* upon society. 1.

For example, you think you are falling in love because you have certain feelings. But why call such feelings "love" and not something else? It is because of stories you have heard and what you have seen on TV. 2.

The Cuban Philosophical Polemic (1838 -40), a remarkable debate across the entire island, urged the priority of epistemology (the philosophical study of knowledge) in school curricula.<sup>3</sup> Debaters are credited by historians with teaching Cubans how to think. 4. They clarified the *nature* of critical thought: It depends upon universals, which depend upon

institutions (social practises). More adequate universals require more adequate institutions.

Emma Goldman said “Anarchism, then, really stands for the liberation of the human mind from the ... shackles and restraints of government. Anarchism stands for a social order based on the free grouping of individuals ... according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations”. 5.

But a social movement that is based upon “individual desires, tastes, and inclinations” cannot stand for liberation of the human mind from the shackles of government. Human minds, to some degree or other, express those shackles because they depend upon universals, usually unselfconsciously.

So, the first point is that individual thinking *expresses* hierarchies. It cannot effectively respond to such hierarchies.

The second point is that since thinking is always dependent upon universals and universals depend upon societies, it is impossible to dislodge, through reason and argument alone, a well-established belief, even if false. This is well-known in analytic philosophy of science. 6.

For instance, if I release an object and it does not fall, and I make a sophisticated argument against the law of gravity, no one will study my argument. No one will check my evidence. It is because my claim is implausible. 7.

Reason works like this. If the lights go out, and someone says invading aliens did it, no one investigates. We consider evidence for claims that are plausible, and plausibility depends upon expectations, arising from social practises. If a belief's truth is expected, as we expect gravity, we dismiss counter-examples, rationally.

Hence the third point. The fundamental idea of liberalism, libertarianism and anarchism – that the individual possesses power to choose her destiny as a human being – is false. It is false because it misrepresents the nature of thinking, which depends upon society and always expresses, to some degree or other, social hierarchies. It's a matter, quite simply, of cause and effect.

But the appeal of the ‘inner voice’ persists, defiantly, despite science.

We assume that we live best from ‘within’, which means fulfilling desires, preferences and life plans, within specified limits. We organize our lives to follow dreams, not because they are good, but because we have them, because they are ours. So we think of freedom, roughly, as not being prevented from doing what we want.

This doesn't mean that anything goes. It is an ideal, the limits of which are determined differently by different theorists. Essentially, though, the basic idea is that my conscious mind provides the best resource for controlling my life. The conscious mind, though, like everything else, responds to causation. This was Lenin's point, expressed earlier in the Cuban Philosophical Polemic.

Fourth point: That individuals do not possess the power to control our destinies as *individuals*, has been known for millennia to smart sensitive philosophers including Varela, Luz, José Martí, Marx and Lenin, and also indigenous peoples, living close to the earth,

across continents.

It was known to the Buddha 2500 years ago. He said belief in such power is a deep and pervasive evil. 8.

Early Buddhists referred to *sakkayadithi*, or personality-belief. Personality belief is the conception of ourselves that we rely upon, day by day, to interpret our lives. We invest ourselves in personality belief, expecting it to ground human well-being, non-morally at least, and it cannot do so. It is impossible.

For, it is largely arbitrary, explained by parents, teachers, social context and the media, among other factors. Investment in *sakkayaditthi* is explained by ignorance, particularly of cause and effect.

For this reason, Martí warned Latin Americans not to be 'slaves of Liberty!' 9. The person who looks to himself is like "an oyster in its shell, seeing only the prison that entraps him and believing, in the darkness, that it is the world". 10. Martí insisted that political liberation requires liberation from the shell of the self, not glorifying it, as liberalism was doing, into a preposterous distortion of the demands of human freedom in a dehumanizing world.

Fifth and final point: A false and dangerous idea is being promoted unwittingly by well-intended, otherwise progressive anarchists.

Eugène Ionesco, who worried about fascism, explains. His 1959 play, *Rhinoceros*, is about a small town in France where people turn into rhinoceroses. At first, everyone is horrified by the rhinoceroses but eventually the change becomes seductive. Even the town's logician becomes a rhinoceros, happily, wanting to "move with the times". 11.

Ionesco's play is about totalitarianism, but not the political sort. It's totalitarianism of reason when no questions are raised about how human beings (and monsters) are named. In the end, Berenger, the only human remaining, reminds himself that "[a] man's not ugly to look at, not ugly at all!". However, a few sentences later he says "I should have gone with them while there was still time". 12

*Rhinoceritis* is about universals. Berenger is an individual man who is now, because of social practises, a monster. To think of himself as a human being, and to act as such, he needs to resist a way of thinking. But that way of thinking is now the fabric of his society.

He may claim a better way of thinking by drawing upon intuitions. But his individual claim can now be dismissed, rationally. It is after all implausible given social expectations. If rhinoceritis is presupposed in day to day life, Berenger's arguments, no matter how well supported by evidence, can be dismissed, just as arguments against gravity could be dismissed, rationally. They are implausible. Reason works this way.

Rhinoceritis worried early Cuban activists and later Martí. Martí wrote in "Our America" that the "good governor" brings about by "means and institutions" - i.e. transformation of social, cultural, economic and political practises - the conditions by which every person "knows himself and is active". 13. Through transformation of practises, not by looking "inside", individuals know themselves, as human beings.

At least when there exists systemic, global dehumanization, as there now does, the mythical

“inner voice” possesses no special status as regards human well-being. Rhinoceritis demands transformation of institutions, which requires organization, vision, collaboration, and leaders.

It requires theoretical as well as political vision. This means asking philosophical questions – about the nature of knowledge and what it means to be human. Martí put such questions at the centre of his independence movement. Fidel Castro put them at the centre of the Cuban Revolution, following Martí. Marx asked such questions in the part of his work mostly disregarded by 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxists.

The tiger of imperialism, Martí wrote, crouches “behind every tree, in every corner ... his claws unsheathed”. 14. Neither Martí nor his predecessors thought the tiger was easily known, or even identified. Their preoccupation with the reality of ideas was motivated by personal experience with rhinoceritis, the tiger of imperialism, the disease of dehumanization.

Anarchism doesn’t address rhinoceritis. Liberalism doesn’t either. Grounding social movements in individual desires, orientations and preferences promotes the same hierarchies, in the long run. This was in effect the argument of José de la Luz y Caballero against European liberalism 200 years ago in Cuba. He claimed it was based in a seductive, but false, idea of individual freedom, disregarding the nature of individual thinking, and its dependence upon universals, which depend upon institutions. Luz argued that liberalism ultimately justifies imperialism. Proponents of anarchism might take note.

#### Notes

1.Lenin, V. I. (1961b). *Conspectus of Hegel’s Science of Logic*. In Stewart Smith (Ed.), *Collected Works*, Vol. 38 (Clemens Dutt, Trans., pp. 85– 126). London, UK: Lawrence and Wishart. (Originally published 1930) 189 This point is well known in North American analytic philosophy. See e.g. Searle, John. (1995). *The construction of social reality*. New York, NY: Free Press.

2.This point is well known in North American analytic philosophy. See e.g. Searle, John. (1995). *The construction of social reality*. New York, NY: Free Press.

3.Luz y Caballero, José de la. (1947). *La Polemica filosófica*, Volume 5. Havana, Cuba: University of Havana, p. 113.

4.Torres- Cuevas, Eduardo. (2004). *Historia del pensamiento cubano: Volúmen 1, Tomo 1*.Havana, Cuba: Editorial de ciencias sociales.329f.

5.Anarchism, p. 62

6.E.g. Putnam, Hilary. (1975). *The analytic and synthetic. Mind, language and reality: Philosophical papers*, volume 2 (pp. 33– 69). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

7.Boyd, Richard N. (2010). *Realism, natural kinds and philosophical methods*. In Helen Beebee & Nigel Sabbarton (Eds.), *The semantics and metaphysics of natural kinds* (pp. 212– 34). New York, NY: Routledge

8.E.g. Ledi Sayadaw, *Requisites of Enlightenment* (1999) 256-7

9.Martí, José. (2002). *Prologue to Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde’s poem of Niagara*. In Esther Allen (Ed.

and Trans.), José Martí: Selected writings (pp. 43- 51). New York, NY: Penguin Books. (Originally published 1882), 50-51.

10. Martí "Walt Whitman" Selected, p. 187.

11. Ionesco, Eugène. (2000). Rhinoceros (Derek Prouse, Trans.). New York, NY: Penguin Books. (Originally published 1959), pp. 102 - 3.

12. Ionesco, p. 104.

13. "Our America" Selected, p. 290

14. "Our America" 293

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