

Assange and Truth: The Deeper (Harder) Issue

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When Harold Pinter got the Nobel Prize (2005), he described “a vast tapestry of lies upon which we feed”. He asked why “systematic brutality, widespread atrocities, ruthless suppression of independent thought” were well-known when they occurred in the Soviet Union. But the same events in the US, despite copious evidence, “never happened”.

It shouldn't be a rhetorical question. The answer to Pinter's question is known in countless cultures. It is not obscure. But it is not discussed much in the North.

John Pilger notes an “eerie silence” about Julian Assange. More than any investigative journalist of our time, Assange has exposed “the imperialism of liberal democracies: the commitment to endless warfare and the division and degradation of ‘unworthy’ lives: from Grenfell Tower to Gaza.”

And yet he's been imprisoned for six years with no charges against him. There is no outcry.

The silence is eerie, but not surprising. Assange allows us to see with our own eyes the actions of US military in Iraq. We hear them laugh about the “dead bastards” on the ground, who were carrying cameras, not guns.

There are truths, which Wikileaks reveals, but there is also truth *about* truths. One truth is that empirical evidence, seen and believed, does not shake deep-seated expectations. When beliefs are well-established, presupposed in daily life, indeed, part of identity, evidence is explained away.

It's how we reason. If I release an object that doesn't fall, you don't give up belief in gravity. If I show you a thousand times, you don't waiver. You *expect* gravity. It is a presupposition of life and thought. If you questioned that belief, you'd have to rethink your relationship to the world. It's a reason not to question it.

You see with your own eyes. You dismiss what you see. Or, you explain it away, rationally.

Marx studied how we reason. He knew it depends on expectations, which are ways of life, patterns of behaviour. His dialectical materialism is, among other things, a view about knowledge. Lenin emphasized it. José Martí thought the question so central that the manifesto of the Cuban Revolutionary Party, at the 1895 war of independence, says a goal of the revolution is the nature of ideas.[i]

The “nature of ideas” has consequences. One is that if you want to know the truth about imperialism, in a “vast tapestry of lies”, which *we feed upon*, as Pinter says, you give up expectations: about your country, your lifestyle, yourself.

They knew this in the US anti-war movement. There was a slogan: “There are no innocents”. It meant that if you were not actively opposing US power, you were supporting it: with your expectations, arising from behaviours, intellectual and social, day by day.

The documentaries are powerful. [ii] Students understood that when a society is built on lies, and those lies are expectations, from which you benefit, and in terms of which you understand yourself, you question your own thinking, necessarily and beneficially.

Mark Rudd says about the radical wing of the movement, “We understood the wrongness of our country’s direction. We understood correctly. But we had no way to act upon that understanding”.

It required profound transformation, not just of social structures but of ways of thinking. It meant transforming expectations, which is transforming people. It is why Martí called for a “revolution in thinking”, and why Raúl Roa, brilliant Cuban philosopher and diplomat, like Martí an anti-imperialist, said in 1953 that the world was passing through a crisis more serious than any in history.[iii]

He was referring to the consolidation of US power but in particular to the image it was based upon: of thinking. Roa traced the crisis to the so-called Renaissance. It wasn’t a renaissance, he argues. There was no rebirth of ancient humanism, with its emphasis on contemplation. It was a new view, ground work for capitalism.

Liberalism, libertarianism, anarchism found roots there: in the primacy of the individual, taking for granted expectations, rooted in practises, defining identity. There were few dissenters then, Roa points out. And few in his time.

Isaac Deutscher tells of the peasant who by chance acquires a motor car and insists on harnessing his horse to it. [iv] Deutscher’s story aims, in part, to illustrate the challenge of Marx, philosophically. It is easy to talk about class struggle. And to some extent, it’s easy to talk about imperialism. But attached to easy individualism, in one mode or another, it is eventually useless.

Marx’s view was about the human condition. It wasn’t just his view. Ancient thinkers knew about expectations. They knew about mind/body connection. It was central to the Buddha’s teaching (although not necessarily to popular Buddhism) that unless you control your mind, you are controlled *by* it. You’re controlled by convention. You won’t be free. Worse, still, you won’t know it

According to Roa, the misnamed Renaissance gave rise to a plethora of ideologies advocating imprisonment. That’s at the personal level. But the primacy of individuals is the primacy of expectations, of social behaviors, that make certain truths irrelevant – the most urgent ones.

Wikileaks’ truths about 21st century imperialism may be among them.

Roa’s *Viento sur (Wind from the South)* opens with an echo of Marx’s “A specter is haunting Europe”: “A wind blows in the south”, Roa writes. It is not the renaissance view, rejected hundreds of years ago by thoughtful anti-imperialists who wanted to know humanness. They rejected imperialism, including its lies about how to know it. The “wind” is all about that, as Martí called for it to be in 1895.

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This article was also published on [CounterPunch](#).

Susan Babbitt is author of *Humanism and Embodiment* (Bloomsbury 2014).

Notes.

[i] "The Montecristi manifesto" In Esther Allen (Ed. and Trans.), *José Martí: Selected writings* (pp. 337-45). New York, NY: Penguin Books. (Originally published 1895)

[ii] E.g Kitchel, Mark (Director) (1990), *Berkeley in the Sixties*; Sam Green and Bill Siegel, *The Weather Underground* (2002)

[iii] "Grandeza y servidumbre del humanismo", Havana, 1953

[iv] Deutscher, Isaac, "On Socialist Man" *Marxism, Wars and Revolutions: Essays from Four Decades* (London: Verso Press, 1984) 263 – 76.

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