

# Did Vladimir Lenin Foresee the Information Glut? Commemorating the Birth of José Martí

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Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

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*At the start of the twentieth century, **Vladimir Lenin** was studying Hegel's notes on science. [i] Stalin told him not to bother, that it was more important to unify the party. Lenin replied that by the end of the century, the nature of science would be the most urgent question: how to get truth?*

What did Lenin foresee?

Every second year at this time, honoring the birth of **José Martí** (January 28, 1853), a conference is held at the *Palacio de los Convenciones* in Havana: "For the balance of the world".[ii] Balance is measurement but not of *things*. It is about parts, always in some sense relative to motion.

The conference draws activists and academics from across the world.

**Adam Chávez** was there last time. He is the older brother of Hugo Chávez who led the Bolivarian revolution and died in 2013. Adam pushed Hugo, who preferred baseball, into politics and then followed. He said Venezuela had received pledges from across the continent, to fight if the US intervened. The US had not yet defeated Venezuela, Chávez said, because of Hugo's legacy: People who have tasted dignity don't turn back to erasure and humiliation.

He spoke softly. The room was packed. A woman from Honduras spoke from the floor, then another from Peru. More than the substance of the presentation, I remember the feel of the room.

I've felt it before. I'm used to conferences where every claim is pinned down. Every "t" is crossed, every "l" dotted. No distinction is undefended. Pieces fit together, like a tightfitting jigsaw puzzle. All is clear.

It's not clear where it is *going*.

Adam Chávez' talk was not like that. Distinctions went unnoted, remarks unexplained. What I felt in that room was resonance. What wasn't said didn't need to be, even shouldn't be. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe, an escaped slave, circles the story of why she murdered her children. A circle is all there is, she says, for anyone who must ask.

It can't be pinned it down. There are truths that aren't stateable. Philosophers call them "non-propositional". They are not in sentences. Instead, they explain movement, ways of being.

They are presupposed. In Adam Chávez' case, the movement is 500 years old. The way of being is human. In the *Second Declaration of Havana*, it is the "march of humanity". Martí said precisely that march can right the "unsteady equilibrium of the world". That means it is also about knowledge.

It is for truth. The thing about balance is that it can't be determined according to script. Like someone skilled at theatrical or musical improvisation, balance requires awareness of relations and ability and willingness to respond, to create, to recreate. Lenin called it a "passage through dark waters".

He wrote about dialectic and what it means in practise: for discovery.[iii] Che Guevara used the metaphor of a tuning fork. One prong affects the other and between the two, new sound emerges.

Something was known about truth in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Cuba. Like Lenin, *independistas* thought the nature of truth mattered for politics. What they knew is: All individual thinking is "group think". Every supposedly private thought involves naming. You *name* what you are thinking about. You think to yourself, "I am falling in love". But why call it "love"? Names are socially dependent. They are shared.

This mattered for early independence leaders because the "group" in question – imperialists – denied their humanity. However, they knew a way out of group think: Feeling. Thinking involves naming. Feeling doesn't. Well, it sometimes does, as in the example of love, but it doesn't *have to*.

It is why José de la Luz y Caballero stood before his students in 1862, before dying, and said he'd rather be struck dead than lose the *feeling* for justice. It was how he knew slavery was wrong. He couldn't know from a *theory* of justice because it uses names, depending on society, which has no names for slaves: as people.

Fidel Castro knew it. In 1960, he invited an audience at the UN to imagine "that a person from outer space were to come to this assembly, ... If he were to ask how the world was divided up and he saw on a map that the wealth was divided among the monopolies of four or five countries, he would say, 'The world has been badly divided up'".

The point is not that the world is divided badly. The intellectual truth of such a claim is obvious. Plenty of information shows it. But who *believes* it? Who thinks it matters?

That would take someone from outer space, not conditioned. In 1953, Cuban philosopher, **Raúl Roa**, said the world was passing through its gravest crisis ever.[iv] It was because the consolidation of US power was the consolidation of false ideas: about rationality, for instance. If you're conditioned by such ideas – and it is hard not to be – you think the world is *supposed* to be divided badly.

And you don't know you think that.

It's who you are. Roa argued that the "world's gravest crisis" was consolidation of an idea of thinking. It went with an idea of human beings, identifying *selves* with minds. I *am* my thoughts. Condemned to group think. Martí said, in contrast, "To think is to serve". It breaks up the puzzle.

There's a chance for balance. A chance to discover false beliefs, not stated, but lived. Roa, like Lenin, questions an *idea* of how we think. Perhaps, Lenin foresaw a future of jigsaw puzzles. The wrongness of slavery, in early nineteenth century Cuba couldn't be known by collecting information and fitting the pieces together.

The wrongness of imperialism is not known that way either. But not all buy into the lies Roa identified.

It's why I felt resonance in that room.

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### Notes

[i] Lenin was writing *Materialism and Empirio criticism* (Volume 14, *Collected Works*)

[ii] <http://www.porelequibriodelmundocuba.com/es/general3>

[iii] Volume 38, *Collected Works*

[iv] "Grandeza y servidumbre del humanismo", *Viento Sur*, 44-62 .

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