

Hurricane Irma, No Gas in Florida: Give Truth a Chance. Learn From Cuba

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Global Research, September 15, 2017

[CounterPunch](#) 14 September 2017

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean, USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

As I heard Florida's governor demanding gas, I wondered why they don't learn from Cuba, and send buses. Cuba was there in the CBC newscasts about Florida. It was the country under the satellite image, under the "lingering" eye of category five Irma. For hours, that awful image was in the background as the CBC anchor kept returning to Florida's need for gas.

They won't learn from Cuba. And it is not because Cuba is part of the world's "left-overs", who don't count and whose ideas don't count either. It's not even because of Cold War mentality. The problem is deeper. It's about culture and truth. In short, it's about a culture that denies truth.

The popular cultural anthropologist, **Wade Davis**, says cultures teach us about humanness.[i] He claims to catalogue cultural wealth to know what it means to be human. He gives a platform to cultural representatives expressing "the better angels of our nature".

He doesn't catalogue the culture of imperialism. And he gives no platform to the cultures of resistance long opposing it. He writes,

"Within this diversity of knowledge and practise [of cultures] ... we will all rediscover the enchantment of being what we are, a conscious species".

Well, not all.

Cuban scholar, **Juan Marinello**, writes that one of the great puzzles about Cuba, for its enemies, is how ideas have survived. Somehow, in the late nineteenth century, with the US in economic glory, **Jose Martí**, independence leader, knew Latin Americans could be modern and free without following the US.

And he grasped something not then expressed, which 60 years later would galvanize the poor on three continents: anti-imperialism. Many who study Cuba fail to understand, or even to ask, how such ideas remained motivating through six dark decades of US cultural imposition after Martí's death.

It's because they were true. In the North, we don't believe in truth. Sure, we believe in science. But when it comes to better ways to live, that is, better than what we imagine or expect, given how we currently live, based on values we already hold, there's no truth.

There are different ways to see things, but they're "all good". None are closer to the truth

than others because, after all, “who’s to say?” Canadian philosopher, **Charles Taylor**, says we live in an “age of authenticity” when the ultimate authority on well-being is ourselves.

Davis is typical. He tells us no one who understands the life of the Waorani of Ecuador would want it preserved. But, regrettably, the Penan of Borneo lost a “unique vision of life”. We see that only *some* cultures express our “better angels”. But Davis doesn’t say how he decides. Supposedly, he just *knows*.

Martí knew that imperialist culture, like Davis, just *knows*. And Martí knew it didn’t. **Paulo Freire**, the Brazilian educator, knew it too.

Freire claimed that “authentic humanity” has to be discovered, and moreover that it is impossible that it *not* be discovered.[ii] Of course. The “non-persons” exist, as people. Martí and Freire could not *not* know the imperialist claim was false. They were human. They knew it and they knew that they knew it.

One of the first things that struck me about Cuba was that they take seriously the task Davis dismisses: how to know what it means to be human. When I mentioned this in academic presentations, I got jeered. In retrospect, I don’t think I was understood. How could I be?

There is not that expectation where I live. True, plenty of people dedicate themselves to self-help. But the self-help industry is not about being better people. It is about pursuing happiness. It is not about *being* better. It is about *feeling* better – about yourself.

Sometimes, to know something is true, you have to live it. And sometimes you live it, and you don’t fully understand, but you know you’re empowered in some way, humanly. So, you keep on.

It’s what happened to Thelma in the 1990s film, *Thelma and Louise*: Two women claim their independence from dominating men. Their lives get hard. Louise asks Thelma if she wants to go back. Thelma says, “I don’t know about you, Louise, but something’s crossed over in me and I can’t go back”.

That’s what I heard Cubans saying in the early 90s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the US tightening the blockade. They were skinny, alone, almost universally mocked. I asked,

“Where are you going?” The answer: “We don’t know but we won’t turn back.”

Like Thelma: You find truth, you live it and you learn about human capacities. You continue. It’s more compelling than “happiness”, and more interesting.

Floridians can’t learn from Cuba. Progressive academics talk about listening to the oppressed and marginalized. They debate “epistemic injustice”. But they forget the need for a question, for doubt. Listening is not the issue. Respect is not the issue.

Academics can listen to cultures of resistance without learning about humanness if they think they already know, and if there’s no doubt, no question. *The Second Declaration of Havana* (1962) states that

“Cuba and Latin America are part of ... the struggle of the subjugated people; the clash between the world that is dying and the world that is being born”.

We won't learn about the world being born. Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, North Korea have “pointed out the danger hovering over America and called it by its name: imperialism”. Those who want the real “enchantment”, based on truths, must do the same. Truths, about how to live freely as human beings, are not got academically, not now. Anti-imperialism must raise the question.

Ana Belén Montes raised the question. She's in jail under harsh conditions. [iii] (Please sign petition here.)

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

Notes

[i] *Light at the Edge of the World* (2007); *The Wayfinders* (2009).

[ii] *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970)

[iii] <http://www.prolibertad.org/ana-belen-montes>. For more information, write to the cnc@canadiannetworkoncuba.ca or cincoheroes@listas.cujae.edu.cu.

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