

May Day Marches Against Trump: Confusion or Worse?

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Global Research, May 05, 2017

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

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

The liberal press gleefully reported May Day protests against Trump. Trump is the ugly face of an ugly system. Obama was the refined face of the same ugly system. Trump is not likeable. But precisely as crass and mean-spirited, he's the wrong target for May Day marches. We see his flaws and separate ourselves. It's easy, even reassuring. It's about him, not us.

May Day is about solidarity, which involves sacrifice. Che Guevara warned of a facile view: You support a cause, wishing “the victim success”, as if “cheering on the gladiators in the Roman circus”. Instead, he pointed out, solidarity is joining “the victim in victory or death.” It can't be done without giving up *something*. The sacrifice part of the idea gets lost.

May Day celebrates solidarity with the oppressed. It is not “fellow feeling”. Fellow feeling is that sense of togetherness we get under a banner or a flag. Existentialists called it the “public mind”. It's useless for solidarity with the oppressed. They are the ones invisible to the public mind.

Activists for missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada have made the point. They urge settler Canadians to see our personal stake in the centuries-old discrimination of First Nations peoples. It means losing an identity-conferring history, and taking on that revolutionary emotion called shame. ¹



It can't be done comfortably. Trump is a red herring. But the May Day confusion goes deeper. Neither solidarity nor “the people” arise from fellow feeling, at least not the kind above. Guevara argued that they *become* possible through shared humanity, which must be discovered.

Well known political philosophers talk about “shared humanity” ² but they don't believe in it. If they did, they'd ask how to know it. They don't. Latin American independence leader, José Martí, asked this question. So did Guevara. In some ways, it was the centre of 200 years of independence struggle.

Indeed, Martí went so far as to name “false erudition” a major barrier to independence. ³ He meant Europeans' view of knowing. It was about gain: possessing knowledge. Martí wasn't against knowledge. But being learned is more interesting, and challenging, than a headful of knowledge.

We can't be educated, Martí proposed, without sensitivity. To be educated, to be cultured,

we have to be able to feel. We have to be capable of response, of connection: human connection. It's a bit of a lost art. But it is how people – the ones previously unknown, and unrecognized – become known.

The May Day marches against Trump had an eerie feel. At best, considered against the “vanguard of the beautiful march of humanity”⁴ against imperialism, they passed like ships in the night: marches going a different direction, not knowing what is missed.

But it's worse than that. The distortion of solidarity is also the undermining of moral imagination. It is the refusal of discovery, of innovation, not just in ethics but in science. For, science also depends upon values. Science also, ultimately, requires shared humanity.

In J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, a male dog is beaten when, on sensing a bitch, he became excited and unmanageable.⁵ The result was that the “poor dog didn't know what to do.... it would chase around the garden ... whining, trying to hide.” Coetzee comments that a dog can be punished for wrongdoing— for chewing a shoe — but not for going against its nature. The result is despair and confusion, a dog that punishes itself.

Human beings are punishing ourselves. Marx did not say, as some accuse him, that in a socialist society there will be no greed and hatred.⁶ Instead, in a society better fitted to human nature, people will be *less likely* to build lives informed by greed and hatred.

To make everything about gain, including education, contradicts human nature. It is against our need to know. In Caracas (1999) after Hugo Chávez' election, Fidel Castro said people suffer because of an idea: the “nicely sweetened but rotten idea” that human beings are essentially motivated by material gain.



Fidel Castro

It turns out not to be true. Studies show that only for simple, uninteresting tasks do material incentives inspire better results.⁷ Anyone who thinks about it sees it's a silly idea. Human beings go to great lengths for activities that bring no material gain.

Nonetheless, we build societies on the idea that what matters is gain. Education, travel, relationships are all about gain: the possession of knowledge, experiences, memories, stories. It's all about collecting. And so we experience despair and confusion, like the dog in Coetzee's story.

Yet the greater risk is *not* experiencing despair and confusion. May Day marches in Havana are against a world-order that glorifies gain. Cuba's May Day is about ideas: solidarity, among others. If such ideas could be recognized, even just as worth pursuing, we might have productive confusion: small but useful doubts about the absolute priority of gain. *Not* raising such questions is really the bigger danger.

Susan Babbitt is author of Humanism and Embodiment (Bloomsbury 2014) and José Martí, Ernesto “Che” Guevara and Global Development Ethics (Palgrave MacMillan 2014).

Notes

1. Marx said shame is a most revolutionary emotion.

2. E.g. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (1999), 283
3. "Our America" in *Martí: Selected Readings*, Esther Allen tr. (Penguin, 2002): 290
4. Martí, *Obras completas*, 1963- 66: v. 8: 336
5. (Secker and Warburg 1999) 89- 90
6. The (arguably) best book on Marx's philosophy, including human nature, is Allen Wood, *Karl Marx*, 2nd edition (Routledge, 2004)
7. E.g. Pink, Dan (2010). The surprising truth about motivation. RSA Animate. YouTube video retrieved from [http:// www .youtube .com /watch ?v = u6XAPnuFjJc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6XAPnuFjJc) [Accessed November 19, 2013].

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