

# The Bell Tolls, or Should, for Ana Belén Montes. “Cuba Should Not Be Forced to Submit to US Interests”

By [Prof Susan Babbitt](#)

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*Featured image: Ana Belen Montes*

*At the World Social Forum at Puerto Alegre, Brazil, the late Nobel Prize Winner, **José Saramago** told the following story: In a village near Florence, Italy, in 800 A.D., church bells were rung whenever someone died. One day the bells rang and everyone returned from the fields. They looked to see who had died, but all were present. They asked the bell-ringer, “Who has died?” He said: “Justice has died”. 1*

What is expected of democracy and the Universal Declaration of Rights, Saramago pointed out, is “flowery, empty legalistic rhetoric” falling far short of the “rational, sensitive dignity we once assumed to be the supreme aspiration of humankind”. Just as in ancient times, the village church bell marked death, the bell must toll, loudly and persistently, the death of justice.

“Justice” that takes no issue with the single “economic power... managed by multinational corporations in line with strategies of domination that have nothing to do with the common good to which, by definition, democracy aspires” is not justice. It cannot be. It doesn’t apply to people, or to most.

It can’t recognize them. Saramago’s bell is metaphorical: It is well-known to philosophers and psychologists that we don’t learn when we think we already know. If you tell me why I shouldn’t step off the roof, I don’t listen. I don’t need to. To learn, I need to know that I don’t know – I need questions.

Knowledge isn’t power: If we can’t imagine what it explains, or might, or we don’t care, it’s useless.

Here’s another point about reason: We think according to expectations, arising from practises, that is, from how we live. Saramago refers to “some sort of verbal and mental automatism” arising from liberal institutions, that is, from liberal practises, including ways of thinking. It means we don’t see certain “raw, naked facts.” We don’t expect them and therefore don’t see them, no matter the evidence.

**Ana Belén Montes** saw the facts. 2 She cared. To see what we don’t expect, we have to care. We have to imagine what might be explained by those facts.

She's been imprisoned since 2001. If she were in China, Russia or Venezuela, we'd know her. Sixty years old, with cancer, she's in a Texas prison for women with psychiatric disorders (although she suffers no such disorder), prohibited from visitors (except a few family members), phone calls, letters, and news.

Her crime is that she opposed, and still opposes, her government's foreign policy.

Employed by the Defense Intelligence Agency, she knew facts, now declassified, about US aggression toward Cuba. She had the courage to believe them. She gave them to the Cuban government. She gained nothing. She hurt no one, stole nothing and committed no violence - except to lies.

She believed in justice, the "rational, sensitive dignity" kind. She thought Cuba should not be forced, through assassination, biological warfare, intimidation and destabilization, to submit to US interests.

In Havana recently, a taxi driver told me,

"I have one question: Why are they so afraid of a small, poor country? What do they think will happen if they just let us develop?"

A lot will happen. It has to do, again, with how understanding occurs. We think within social limits. We see and give importance to facts that matter, given our specific interests. But sometimes we encounter an example that makes us care in ways we did not previously. We may even be moved, emotionally. *Then* we consider evidence we would not/could not have considered otherwise. It was there all along.

A Cuban friend working in tourism said that since US citizens began arriving in Cuba in greater numbers, she has not met a single one who was not positively surprised. "It is not what I expected", they say.

If only they would seek out the explanations. But this takes imagination, caring, and courage.

**Eduardo Galeano** tells the following story in *El Libro de los Abrazos*: A friend was taking his small boy to see the sea for the first time. As they approached, the sea was just an intense smell. When finally it was in front of them, in its immensity, the boy was quiet, speechless before unexpected beauty. Eventually, able to speak, he said simply, "Papá, help me to see".

We are lied to about democracy. This is well-known. But we are also lied to about lies. The truth is that we don't see facts just by looking. We don't even see what is in front of us just by looking. We need help to see what is not expected.

Galeano says art helps us to see. It can help us to see what we don't see. It raises questions. People can do that too. Ana Belén Montes is one. She has believed, and still believes, truths that are available. She has possessed, and evidently still possesses, the moral imagination to know such truths matter.

After 16 years in isolation, she said,

“I live totally isolated. I am subject to extreme psychological pressure ... but I will resist until the end.”

She went on:

“I say to you what I’ve said to Cubans and to those sharing my solidarity with Cuba, that what matters is that the Cuban revolution exists ... that there will always be the Cuban revolution. Cubans must care for their revolution. I tried to do that”.

Cuba is an example. But to see what it is an example of – dignity, humanity – we may need help. Ana Belén Montes should be known, and released, for the sake of justice. But she should also be known in a time of lies, even *about* lies, for the sake of truth. As Galeano suggests, we need help even to see beauty, if unimagined. So much more so for justice, unimagined and urgent.

*For more information on Ana Belén Montes, write to the Canadian Network on Cuba*

*([cnc@canadiannetworkoncuba.ca](mailto:cnc@canadiannetworkoncuba.ca)) or in Cuba, Cuba X Ana Belén Montes*

*([cincoheroes@listas.cujae.edu.cu](mailto:cincoheroes@listas.cujae.edu.cu)).*

**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. Saramago, José, (2002, March 9), “From justice to democracy by way of the bells (Speech at the World Social Forum. Puerto Alegre, Brazil).

2.

E.g. <http://www.havanatimes.org/?p=117432>; <https://www.counterpunch.org/2016/02/08/cuba-war-and-ana-belen-montes/>

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