

The Passing of Fidel, Three Years Later

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Fidel Castro, dead three years this month, resisted US power in a way that could be learned from. I don't mean the Revolution. It began earlier. Castro insisted on that. Thus, the old flag and anthem were retained. The country was not renamed.

It was respect for history: of dead ends. Cintio Vitier refers to the law of the “callejón sin salida”, [i] referring to events in 1878, 1898 and 1933. That law inspired the “law of the impossible”: in poetry, art and literature.[ii] It wasn't an “impossible dream”. It wasn't a dream.

It was deeper, broader, and the idea is ancient.

When Castro said, “Y todo lo que parecía imposible fue posible” [iii] (all that seemed impossible was possible), he drew on tradition. It's philosophical, but not one we teach.

The “law of the impossible” is about the seemingly impossible becoming actionable, which requires ideas, which generate expectations. What you see – with your own eyes – can be (rationally) dismissed if unexpected. It gets explained away. But if it becomes plausible, it merits explanation.

This part is known in philosophy, intellectually.[iv]

The point is taken further in Hans Fallada's *Alone in Berlin*. Resistance to Hitler is implausible. And indeed, Otto and Anna, who resist, are unsuccessful. They are caught. They die. Politically, they fail.

Otto is told: “You must have known you had no chance! It's a gnat against an elephant. I don't understand it in a sensible man like you!” Otto's answer: “No, and you will never understand it either. You see, it doesn't matter if one man fights or ten thousand; if the one man sees he has no option but to fight, then he will fight, whether he has others on his side or not”.

The important part of the exchange is the “No, and you will never understand it either.” It's about acting for truth when results are uncertain, indeed, unlikely, but also, importantly, when that truth is humanness. The “law of the impossible” is humanness at risk and you can't know that law if you don't believe in humanness.

Fallada refers to “integrity” but that term is problematic, currently, because truth is problematic. There's no fuzziness in this regard, though, in anti-imperialist traditions. Brazilian philosopher, Paulo Freire, for example, refers to “authentic humanity” and says it's impossible that it *not* be detected.

He doesn't defend the idea of truth *about* that impossibility. It's presupposed in the struggle

he lived: against dead ends. Experience of such truth made it plausible. If one knows dehumanization – dead ends – there is, as Otto says, no option.

When Otto and Anna are tried, the Nazi judge “could see recognition in the faces of the spectators in the courtroom”. At all costs, he “wanted to strip the accused of that recognition”.

It makes resistance plausible for others. But he fails. And powerful imperialist liberal ideology hasn’t stripped Cuba of recognition. It’s a fact. In Nazi prison, Reichardt, an orchestra conductor, tells Otto, “It would have been better if we’d had a good plan As it was we all acted alone, we were caught alone, and every one of us will have to die alone. But that doesn’t mean that we *are* alone”.

Herein lies the ancient part of the idea: essential interdependence. It’s not just ancient. Vitier uses the word “earthy” (*teluricidad*) to link Cuban thinkers who defied dead ends of imperialism. It’s how they knew slavery was wrong. It was a “sentimiento de la justicia”,^[v] feeling not theory.

That question of *how* to know something becomes urgent when what needs to be known is *hard* to know, seemingly impossible. But one must think there is something to be known.

When Anna urges Otto to stop distributing his postcards, Otto says, “Who wants to die. Everyone wants to live, everyone – Even the most miserable worm is screaming for life! I want to live too. But maybe it’s a good thing, Anna, ... to think of a wretched death, and to get ready for it. So that you know you’ll be able to die properly, without moaning and whimpering. That would be disgusting to me ...”

Anna agrees. To “die properly” is an implausible idea in the happiness-obsessed North. But it’s been rediscovered by scientists in the US: doctors.^[vi] They argue, compellingly, that a certain way of understanding the human condition limits medicine. It’s a way of understanding that denies vulnerability. It denies interdependence. Dr. Arthur Kleinman calls it “reciprocity”

He says “being present’ is how scientists identify aspects of a problem that are unexpected. It advances medicine. But it’s submission, giving up: of expectations for success, for example. Dr. Adam B. Hill says medicine can’t accept, in theory or practise, human brokenness.

It makes *care* implausible. The very idea is implausible because care is connection. It’s a way of thinking that involves service and sacrifice. And it’s irremediably contrary to “political fictions” like the “self-made man” of liberalism. Kleinman says such fictions are “fundamentally wrong”. He’s brave.

In 1953, at trial, Castro said,

“To those who will say I am a dreamer let me quote the words of [José] Martí, ‘A true man does not seek the path where advantage lies, but rather the path where duty lies, and this is the only practical man . . . because he who has looked back on the essential course of history . . . knows that, without a single exception, the future lies on the side of duty.’”

Fallada tells Otto and Anna's story (based on real events) because it sows seeds for the future. Cuba's story is urgent for this same reason, and many do tell it. But they tell a political story, never the philosophical.

Castro should have added that looking properly at history requires sacrificing expectations: about who does philosophy, for example. It seems impossible. The intellectual superiority of the North is part of identity, like slavery was. Seeing it as "law of the impossible" - humanness at risk - is real resistance.

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Notes

[i] No exit. In *Ese sol del mundo moral* (Editorial Félix Varela, 1996) 151

[ii] *ibid*

[iii] July 26, 1971.

[iv] E.g. Hilary Putnam, "The analytic and the synthetic" (1975).

[v] José de la Luz y Caballero, 1862

[vi] Arthur Kleinman, *Soul of Care* (2019); Adam B. Hill, *Long Walk out of the Woods* (2019).

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