

Trump's "Shitholes" Are an Easy Target

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*Outrage about "shitholes" is hypocritical. As is argued at this website, elite "progressives" – **Noam Chomsky, Tariq Ali** — accept US power. It's not just US power. It's the ideological power of the rich North.*

It tells us who thinks. For 24 years, teaching in a Canadian Philosophy Department, I saw three entire continents dismissed, routinely. It is as if they have no thinkers. You learn about Haiti and Nigeria in Sociology or Geography, but not in Philosophy.¹

A student says, "I didn't know Latin American philosophy exists". She doesn't know and she is in third year. It is not her fault. No one uses Trump's colourful language in universities. It is polite, gentrified dismissal, more powerful than Trump's inanities.

Consider mindfulness, enormously popular, even in medicine. The Buddha is the source but like Marx, he is not read. He is not taught *as a philosopher*. You might find him in Religious Studies, not in Philosophy.

He's a scientist, emphasizing cause and effect. You can't read him seriously without seeing cause and effect. It's what Marx is about too. Relations, connections. Sensible, scientific ideas about the human condition are not taught. They are dismissed.

Cause and effect is hard, philosophically. It means we must sometimes be acted *upon* – by the world, by others – in order to know. Marx said we create the world that creates us. We change the world and it changes us. And so we learn. But we must be *able* to be changed.

It takes humility – existential, not moral. There is loss, renunciation. Mindfulness is awareness of cause and effect – in body and mind. It is not supposed to be mindfulness *of me*.

Theravada Buddhist monk, **Bikkhu Boddhi**, says mindfulness is not taught properly in the West. He says it has been detached from its roots. ² It may be that it is not *understood* properly.

He writes:

"The practise of mindfulness thus leads ... to a new affirmation and appreciation of the world, so one can joyfully savour each fleeting event, each relationship, each undertaking in its wistful evanescence, unperturbed when it passes".

In other words, it is about being happy, in the Western sense: experiencing pleasure.

A few hundred years ago, European philosophers drew a line between science and ethics. They distinguished facts about how the world *is* – science – from facts about how it *ought* to be – ethics. They said you cannot know how the world *ought* to be by considering how it *is*.

The Buddha thought differently: Precisely to the degree that we know the physical reality of the universe – cause and effect – we know how to live. It is because we know connections, dependence. We learn about change, decay, insecurity, and we face all that.

And how we live – ethically – matters to what we know: science. If I harbour ill will, my mind is agitated. Even a small amount of ill-will creates agitation. And when my mind is agitated, I don't see reality *as it is*.

Instead, I impose myself upon it. And this is what we learn from liberal academic philosophers. It is reason itself: I reason best, roughly, when I act to realize my deep-seated desires, preferences and life-plans. Or so we're told. It's the model: instrumental rationality.

It needs to be rejected, thoroughly. The “shitholes” phenomenon is not just political. It is part of a world view that dismisses some of the world's great thinkers.

It is a worldview that creates illusions, and we live in fear.

US-Haitian writer, **Edwidge Danticat**, is surprised that Haitians live well with much less protection from the reality of death. ³ Why is she surprised? Why doesn't she investigate that reality, fully, and express it as non-surprising? It would be a relief for those debilitated by liberal illusions.

So, even a Haitian writer, proclaiming Haitian roots, dismisses Haiti as a source of ideas about who we are, as human beings, part of a universe we can't control.

Mindfulness is about knowing reality, *as it is*. But mindfulness is hard to properly grasp in a landscape of self-centredness and self-absorption, where even higher education spins illusions about existence, and who is permitted to talk about it.

Ironically, we'd be further along, scientifically, if we taught religious philosophers. Thomas Merton, Jean Vanier, Ivan Illich. They are realists, recognizing that life includes death and suffering.

They know silence. As academic, I've not encountered the concept of mental silence. Yet if we respect universal causation, we must also listen: to the world, to its people. We cannot know the world *really* if intellectual activity is ignorantly informed by fabrications of our own self-importance.

Jose Martí said that when the mind is quiet “intuition springs forth like a caged bird”. We know ourselves as human, he wrote, through nature, and only through nature.

It is a view incompatible with self-absorption. Mindfulness, properly understood, is about loss. As you gain understanding of cause and effect, self-absorption weakens, mercifully. Marx was about looking outward. So was Lenin. They said human freedom is realizing human potential, not doing what you want. The two don't go together – because of our nature, and the nature of the world, interconnected.

José Ingenieros, brilliant Argentinean psychiatrist who turned his copious talents to anti-imperialism after WW1, led a movement for educational reform, across Latin America. He saw that the entire educational system had brought South America to the feet of the imperialists. 4

If we care about “shitholes”, we might follow his lead. It’d be more interesting, and useful, than targeting Trump.

Puerto Rican **Ana Belén Montes** helps show the way. She is still silenced in a US jail. 5 Please sign petition [here](#).

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

Notes

1. See <https://www.africaresource.com/> for a counter view.
2. “The transformations of mindfulness” in *Handbook of mindfulness* Ronald E. Purser, David Forbes, Adam Burke eds. (Springer International Publishing, 2016)
3. Danticat, Edwidge (6 October 2013), *Writers and Company with Eleanor Wachtel*. (Podcast). <http://www.cbc.ca/writersandcompany/episode/2013/10/06/edwidge-danticat-interview>
4. In Raúl Roa, *Bufa subversiva* (Havana: Ediciones la memoria, 2006) 35
5. <http://www.prolibertad.org/ana-belen-montes>. For more information, write to sarahnes@cubarte.cult.cu or cincoheroes@listas.cujae.edu.cu

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