



Fidel Castro and Cuba's "Battle for Ideas", For Peace and Justice

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Some suggest more abstract "theoretical" questions are a luxury. There is no time, given global crises, for such ivory tower work. Yet no less a revolutionary than Fidel Castro said that people suffer because of concepts. He made the point in Caracas after Hugo Chávez was first elected in 1998. The example he offered was not obviously political.

Castro said people suffer because of

"nicely sweetened but rotten ideas ... that man is an animal moved only by a carrot or when beaten by a whip". 1

That is, we suffer because of ideas about what it means to be human. Marx, after all, thought human beings are distinct from other animals because we care about such an issue: We don't just try to realize our nature. We need to know what it means to do so. In capitalist societies, he argued, we suffer "unnatural separation" from our own humanity. We are alienated, not just from others but from ourselves, and from our "species essence". To live well, Marx wrote, we must fulfill our "natural vocation" for "conscious life activity" and judge it to be a human one:

"Human beings will only be complete when the real individual . . . has become a species being". 2.

Species essence is known through intimate *felt* connection between one individual and members of the species as a whole. Of course, now, in the North at least, we don't believe in species being. Some political theorists, discussing "development", refer to "shared humanity". 3 But it is rhetoric. Properly understood, the idea is hard. It counters the ideology that living well is a matter of believing in oneself.

We give lip service to "connectivity" but resist pursuing it. It is why the "battle for ideas", in Cuba, extends back two centuries, predating Marx. Independence activists saw the mistake in European liberalism. They argued against a philosophical presupposition of that view, namely, that human beings can know themselves by themselves, as if it's easy, as if it can happen without real solidarity.

In Caracas, Castro said,

“We are winning the battle for ideas... They discovered ‘smart weapons’ but we discovered something more powerful, namely, the idea that humans think and feel.” 4.

Che Guevara knew this idea. He argued, against the Soviets, that human beings are not primarily motivated by material incentives. Even in the USSR, “nicely sweetened but rotten ideas” were holding sway.

In Cuba, such questions have always been part of the broader, global struggle, for peace and justice. In a speech on December 2, 2001, months after the attack on New York City, Castro said, “There is no more powerful weapon than an individual who knows who she is and where she is going”. José Martí said knowing oneself, *as human*, is every person’s most difficult task. He can’t be accused of being apolitical.

I was reminded of this line of thinking when I saw the acclaimed Cuban film, *Conducta*.⁵ At first glance, it is about Cuba’s many problems. It tells of a boy and his teacher. The boy’s mother is a drug addict and the boy is a problem at school. His teacher defends him and gets into trouble. School authorities try to force her to retire. Ten years past retirement age, she resists retirement for the sake of the children.

We learn about poverty, dog-fighting, discrimination and bureaucratic rigidity. Yet the film expresses what kept taking me back to Cuba, again and again, during the long “special period”, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The problems seemed intractable. People were leaving. The ones remaining were skinny. The world’s media, almost without exception, predicted Cuba’s demise.

Yet underneath was an undeniable energy, human energy. Everywhere, problems were discussed, at meeting after meeting. I couldn’t see the way forward, or any real solutions. But I always left Cuba inspired, moved by something I couldn’t quite identify. I hadn’t experienced it elsewhere. People were saying they didn’t know where they were going but they were determined not to turn back.

In *Conducta*, the old teacher, called to a meeting to celebrate her (forced) retirement, interrupts the program to read a prepared statement. She describes the pride of her grandmother, descended from slaves, when the teacher showed her her teaching certificate. Children, she explains, whatever their problems, are still children. They can be guided and prepared. Her words are simple but direct.

She refuses to retire. They will have to fire her. And then she stands up and walks out, and on, into the street. It is this scene that represents what I have found so intriguing about Cuba. No matter how complex the situation, there are always individuals like that teacher. There may not be a clear vision of the future, but there is always a direction. It can be felt. It is people, driven by feeling between people.

It might seem paradoxical. We expect citizens of a country with a communist government, with a single party, to be automatons. Certainly, some are like that, as in any society. But there’s no contradiction there, in theory. Armando Hart, who led Cuba’s literacy campaign in 1961, says it’s a pity intellectuals don’t *read* Marx’s philosophy. If they did, they’d know a real alternative to liberal individualism. 6

Speaking to medical workers in 1960, Guevara advised: “If we all use the new weapon of

solidarity ... then the only thing left for us is to know the daily stretch of the road and to take it. Nobody can point out that stretch ... in the personal road of each individual; it is what he will do every day, what he will gain from his individual experience”.

“What he will gain from individual experience”! Guevara was a dialectical materialist. This means he was a naturalist, recognizing causal interdependence. He saw human freedom as depending upon the “close dialectical unity” existing between people moving collaboratively in a definite direction. He was not against individual freedoms. He just had a more realistic, sensible conception of how we know them.

Part of the problem with “nicely sweetened but rotten ideas” is that material incentives give nothing back, humanly. The “close dialectical unity” Guevara refers to is a dynamic, constitutive relationship in which people receive back from others. They grow. Martí thought it was just “plain and sensible” scientific realism. Cause and effect. But it involves feelings. That’s different, in today’s world.

When Castro says, “we discovered ... that humans think and feel”, he is not making a trivial statement. Although science tells us mind and body are connected, North Atlantic cultures, including academic philosophers, cleave them apart. This is well discussed, in *Academia*: It is acceptable to attribute *some* rationality to feelings but we don’t want to go too far.

Feminists deserve credit for insisting on embodiment. Arguably, Martí pushed the point further. He knew imperialism and how it dehumanizes. Thus, he also knew species being – humanness – needs to be discovered. And when something is unimaginable, unexpected, reason has limits. Martí suggests, therefore, that reason alone cannot bring peace and show us how to grow, as human beings. 7

Some accuse him of being anti-science, or some kind of spiritualist. But like Marx, he was a naturalist and a realist, who recognized that we know the world through causal contact, sometimes felt in the body before conceptualized with the mind. Indeed, Che Guevara was bold enough to say “at the risk of seeming ridiculous” that revolutions can only be driven by “great feelings of love”. 8

Those who see *Conducta* as being about Cuba’s problems miss the point. A Cuban friend said about the film, “We are a society full of contradictions but with energy to persevere”. And now, for sure, there are new problems. The energy is still there. Its source, in ideas, needs to be respected. Guevara’s remark about love is part of a discussion of the centrality of individuals. The argument is deeply philosophical.

In the 2000s, I introduced a philosophy course at my university, taught at the University of Havana by Cuban philosophers. I wanted students to know that *ideas* come from Cuba, not just culture. Administrators quickly moved the course to Development Studies, which is a Social Sciences department. It was as if a course in Cuba could not be Philosophy. It had to be Geography or Sociology.

The course was renamed to be on culture, not philosophy. I had introduced the course as a philosophy course precisely to counter a stereotype: Ideas come from the North, culture from the South. When North Americans talk about freedom and democracy, we are talking about the human condition. We call that philosophy. When Latin Americans talk about freedom and democracy, it’s something else.

José Martí, for example, is taught in literature departments, if taught at all in the North. Yet, his many volumes of work offer a compelling vision of human freedom and how we know it. It was central to his radical independence movement. Respected Cuban scholars argue that he proposed a “revolution in thinking” and a “new way of being”. 9

In 1997, closing the fifth PCC Congress, Fidel Castro said, “What we cannot lose is direction. If we lose direction, we lose everything”. Right now, the vision for Cuban socialism is not fully clear. But the direction is still evident. It is about species essence. However, to know it as such, which we must, those “nicely sweetened” ideas should be properly identified. It may be urgent, politically and globally.

Notes:

1. “A revolution can only be born from culture and ideas”. (Master lecture at the Central University of Venezuela, February 3) (Havana, Cuba: Editora Política, 1999) p. 9
2. Marx, Karl “On the Jewish question”. In Robert C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx- Engels reader: Second edition* (New York, NY: Norton) p. 46.
3. Amartya Sen, *Development is freedom*, p. 283
4. “A revolution”, p. 21.
5. English title *Behaviour*, Spain, 2014, Dir. Ernesto Baranas
6. *Ética, cultura y política* (Havana: Centro de estudios martianos, 2006) pp. 132-4
7. “Emerson” in *Selected Writings* tr. Esther Allen (Penguin, 2002), p. 128
8. “Man and socialism in Cuba”. In David Deutschman (Ed.), *The Che Guevara reader* (New York, NY: Ocean Press, 1997) p. 211.
9. Rodríguez, Pedro Paulo, “José Martí en tiempos de reenquiciamiento y remolde: Desatar a América y desuncir al hombre”. In *Pensar, prever, server* (Havana, Cuba: Ediciones Unión, 2012) p. 10; “Una en alma y intento”: *Identidad y unidad latinoamericana en José Martí*. In *De los dos Américas* (Havana, Cuba: Centro de estudios martianos, 2010) p. 5

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