

Bees and the “Eternally Not Talked About”

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Dostoevsky said former seminarians (which included many Russian radicals then) were “too complete, too hostile, too sharp and therefore too limited.” That is, they were limited precisely by being too complete, by fitting all the pieces together, in a tight-fitting puzzle, with no rough edges.

Einstein supposedly learned more from Dostoevsky than from any scientist. Dostoevsky’s characters often struggle with “importunate” thoughts. The thoughts are sensations, felt but not expressed. There is anguish. The characters must wait, even submit, to know “something new”.

It’s about development of ideas, and it’s a point made by Lenin. He said unless people are *trained to feel* abuses against others, no matter their class, they won’t have political consciousness. Obsession with immediate “palpable results” – with utility, completeness – is ultimately conservative.[i]

It leaves old ideas in place. In Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin says about religion that “there’s something else here that’s not that, and it will eternally be *not that*; ... and they will eternally be talking *not about that*.” He’s not saying there is something that can’t be said. It’s more interesting. The prince is saying that something *is* talked about, but in such a way that something else is *never* talked about.

You talk about something in order *not* to talk about something else. Importunate thoughts can be *eternally not talked about*.

I found an importunate thought in a comical, deeply thoughtful, new book on bee keeping.[ii] It inadvertently shows the importance of Lenin, also, of course, *eternally not talked about*.

Bees are “cute and fuzzy” but opening a hive is “like a volcano – a pulsating, buzzing, confusing, bloodthirsty, single organism that, quite frankly, is a bit gross and definitely scary.” The author gets bitten, spends a lot of money, and ends up without honey. Still, he persists.

The importunate idea is motivation. His compelling reasons are not moral or material, not honey or saving the planet. In fact, neither material nor moral reasons motivate sacrifice. This is known. It is an importunate idea because it goes against the popular (liberal) myth of the “self-made man”.

The author persists because he discovers a “195-pound man who now feels genuine compassion and sympathy toward an insect that weighs only about one tenth of a gram.” That is, he continues because bees show him what he can be, as a person. He *learns* to respond to bees and learns about humanness.

It is easy to miss such an opportunity when the objective is results. Bees respond to each other. The waggle dance is how one bee tells the others where the sweet nectar is. One bee knows and the others absorb her energy as she “dances”. Bees get direction from response. And they get results.

Philosophers are enthralled by instrumental rationality, or the idea that reasons are defined by *ends*. If I have ends, I have reasons. If I have purpose, I’m a person. Social utility.

But how do I know *human* ends?

It’s not talked about. And there’s a reason. Raúl Roa, brilliant Cuban philosopher and politician, explained in 1953. It’s an idea of human beings invented by philosophers who didn’t care about *human* ends.[iii] They didn’t *need* to. They defined them. Simón Bolívar, who admired European philosophers, knew they missed a crucial point. The colonized, he pointed out, are “even lower than servitude, lost or worse absent from the universe”. The “human” part of “human rights” didn’t include them.

Ho Chi Minh saw this. A new book, *Hemingway and Ho Chi Minh in Paris*, [iv] describes Ho as well-read, lover of arts, intelligent, open-minded, shy and compassionate. Like Bolívar, he admired European philosophers. He admired the US constitution, citing it as prime minister. Ho read Marx and found him uninformed about colonized people. But he was elated when he read Lenin.

We’re not told why.

The subtitle of the book is “the art of resistance”. Hemingway and Ho Chi Minh were in Paris after the First World War. Hemingway was there to learn writing technique, Ho for anti-colonial resistance. By 1922, they were among the best journalists in the city. Both wanted revolution.

But Ho had found a friend in Lenin while Hemingway discussed surrealism over “boozy lunches”. This difference is not explored. Juan Marinello, Cuban intellectual of early twentieth century, warned Latin American artists of precisely the trends attracting Hemingway.[v] Abstractionist art, with its anarchistic tendencies, makes sense to those whose humanity is taken for granted. It made sense to Hemingway but not to Ho, ultimately, according to the author. But this is not explained.

Lenin said *all* aspects of life must be studied along with ideas explaining them. How the world is observed and experienced can’t be taken for granted because it depends on ideas, including “human”. Philosophy must start from there, with concrete details explaining deep yearning by the oppressed for real dignity. It’s messy, incomplete, not the tight-fitting jigsaw puzzles philosophy mostly offers.

Lenin’s philosophy did start there, with response to what was happening. It’s about motivation, and the energy and insight derived from such response, through feeling, to the real world, understood through careful and continuous scientific study, with sensitivity developed through art, for one thing.

Marinello wrote about culture. He was a Leninist, like Roa. Lenin said revolution must be about ideas. It can’t be just politics and economics. Otherwise, old ideas dominate, disallowing *human* liberation in a dehumanizing world. In Cuba, this commitment has always

been there. It can't be missed, and yet it is missed. Sympathetic books about Cuba's startling achievements make no reference at all to Roa, Marinello, Lenin. They are eternally not talked about.

If you keep talking as if individuals just *know* what it means to be human, so that all that matters is what we want, need and do, there's no need to talk about ideas determining such wants, needs and actions. Writers comment on the "battle for ideas" in Cuba, but leave out the ideas.[vi] Or they notice the significance of the arts in Cuba, Mexico and Nicaragua, during periods of political transformation, and omit the (philosophical) explanation.[vii]

Precisely this omission was foreseen by Roa. Keep talking about results, success, action, ends, and you can *eternally not talk* about ideas explaining those results. It's as if there are no such ideas.

Just utility. Some even ask about the social utility of art. They should keep bees and read Lenin.

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Notes

[i] E.g. "What is to be done?"

[ii] Dave Doroghy, *Show me the Honey: Adventures of an accidental Apiarist* (Touchwood, 2020). See review: <https://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/show-me-honey-adventures-accidental-apiarist>

[iii] "Grandeza y servidumbre del humanismo", *Viento Sur* (Havana, 2015) 44-62.

[iv] By David Crowe (Fortress Books, 2020). Review here: <https://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/hemingway-and-ho-chi-minh>

[v] « La exposición antibiennial de la Habana », *Cuba Cultura* (Letras cubana 1989) 18-25

[vi] E.g. <https://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/we-are-cuba>

[vii] E.g. <https://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/i-never-left-home>

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