

Cuba: The Revolution “Must be Fun”

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Tony Perrottet’s Cuba Libre! Che, Fidel and the improbable revolution that changed the world is a “colourful page turner”. [i] Perrottet wanted a book that is “entertaining and readable, unsaturated by ideology”. He succeeds in the first, not the second.

It’s about a “scrappy bunch of idealistic young people who ... beat a professional army of [dictator Fulgencio Batista’s] 40,000 soldiers”. Indeed, it is fun to know how Castro, with 18 followers, few guns, convinced (the New York Times’) Herbert Matthews of a well-armed force of hundreds.

But the Cuban Revolution was not improbable. And the story about *that* is not fun. It is serious, involving ideas. They expose lies: that are lived.

Perrottet’s book is typical of how many, who admire Cuba, write about it: as if Cubans are steeped in ideology while liberals on the left have none. They are “anti-authoritarian”, ignoring the tyranny of their own rich lives. They make no “value judgments”. They “just listen” and tell stories.

It’s easy. But it has a dark side: It *imposes* ideology, ignorantly or dishonestly.

According to science, no one “just listens”, at least not without mental training, which we don’t believe in in the North because of the same ideology Perrottet assumes. To “just listen” requires mental control.[ii] It takes work. Cuban philosopher and diplomat, Raúl Roa, says the Renaissance, instead of reviving ancient humanism, buried it. It buried the contemplation part of human well-being.[iii]

It glorified the “man of action”, the “anti-authoritarian” who listens to an “inner voice”, made plausible by power. This story was known to the “scrappy bunch”: part of centuries-long traditions of poets, philosophers and revolutionaries who rejected the ideology that says stories are *just* stories.

Perrottet notes the rebels didn’t kill prisoners. They treated them well. They gave scarce medicines to Batista’s soldiers when they set them free. They educated each other: about literature, history, language. Perrottet reports these facts but not their importance.

They have explanatory significance. Read *Zona Roja*. [iv] It opens with phone calls on September 9, 2014. Ebola was devastating Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The Secretary General of the UN called personally to United States, France and the Netherlands.

He also called the president of a fourth country, small and poor: Cuba. Cuba mobilized more doctors, faster, than all the rich countries put together. When Liberia’s desperate president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, received Raúl Castro’s answer, that Cuba was mobilizing, she said, emotionally, “We knew Cuba would not desert us”. She told him to tell the Cuban people:

“We will never forget”.

Cubans are medically well trained. Of a 256-member contingent, only one contracted Ebola and, after recovering in Cuba, returned to Sierra Leone to complete his mission.

Zona Roja is about extraordinary people, but not “improbable”. Many had been in internationalist missions in Africa, Asia and Latin America, including liberation struggles in Angola and Nicaragua and natural disasters in Haiti and Pakistan.

Author Enrique Ubieta Gómez describes them as ordinary folk who know we live in an unequal world. They know something else, not ideological, or at least, not any more than science is ideological: We exist interdependently. Ubieta describes Cuban internationalism as an “inescapable ethic”. Once you’ve lived it, you cannot *not* live it. You receive the human benefits of knowing inescapable interconnection.

Che Guevara called it “moral incentives”. It is felt. But not just Marx noticed we don’t live alone, and we don’t think alone. Frei Betto is a Brazilian priest, who committed to Christianity at 21 because he saw the “*vida religiosa*” bringing revolution to Brazil. Betto, imprisoned for four years by Brazil’s dictatorship, has lived his life in activism for the poor.

As liberation theologian, he supported the revolution in Nicaragua, proud to be part of its literacy campaign. But Betto no longer goes there. He says the church and government abandoned the poor.[v] Not so in Cuba. At an international conference in Havana in 2019, Betto said: “No traicioné ni a Cristo, ni a Castro.” [vi]

Why? The story’s been around for millennia. Those who are rational investigate available explanations. They look for the one with most explanatory capacity, that is, the one explaining more of the facts than rival views. But elite philosophers are not rational when it comes to Cuba, or the South generally.

Noam Chomsky holds the same (philosophical) view as Perrottet. In a documentary at *Russia Today*, Chomsky says the US is the freest place on the planet: It’s because of minimal government interference. That is, the US is free because, more than anyone else, US folk can do what they want.

That Chomsky holds this implausible view of freedom is not as interesting as the fact that he doesn’t defend it. Philosophers call it “begging the question”. It means you assume you are right before you start the debate. You do that by taking for granted your own view of the concept at issue: freedom, for instance. Your view needs no defense, and your rivals don’t exist or are talking about something else.

Theirs is a story “gone awry”, as Perrottet says (without argument) about Cuba. It works if your view dominates and if everyone in the conversation, or recognized to be so, holds the same view.

It’s bad argument. It’s also uninteresting. But so it goes with the “anti-authoritarian left”, assuming a view of freedom without defense because it can. The rivals, we all know, are “ideologically saturated”. Cuban philosopher, José Martí, commented that it is like an oyster in a shell, seeing the shell and mistaking it for the world, thinking the world is dark.

It is dark if you think freedom is doing what you want. But never mind. It’s fun.

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

Notes

[i] *Newsday* (January 16 2019). See my: <https://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/cuba-libre-che>

[ii] E.g. William Hart, *The art of living* (HarperCollins)

[iii] "Humanismo y servidumbre", *Viento sur*, 1953

[iv] Enrique Ubieta Gómez, 2016, Casa Editora Abril.

[v] *Frei Betto, Una biografía*, (Editorial José Martí) 337

[vi] "I didn't betray Christ or Castro", *Por el equilibrio del mundo*, Havana, January 28-30, 2019

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