

Culture and Criticism: The Radical Historical Promise of Wandering Dialogues in Cuba

By [Prof Susan Babbitt](#)

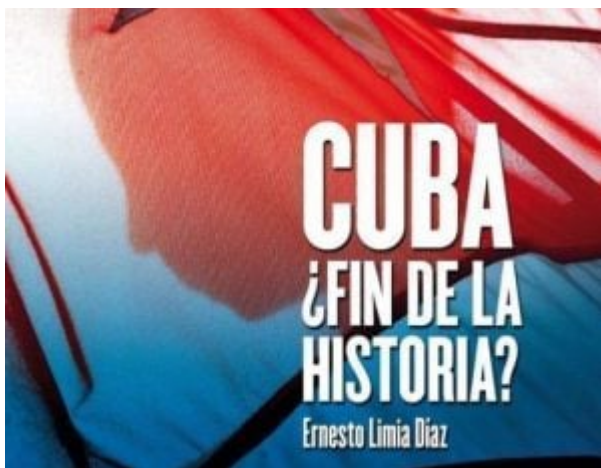
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At his 90th birthday, Fidel Castro wrote that for three years after going away for first grade, no one took him to the movies. Cinema was a novelty. Keeping young children from culture is the greatest damage that can be done to them, Castro remarked. He regretted not having written about this.

The anecdote introduces Ernesto Limia's *Cuba: the end of history?* It is discussed at concerts across the island by beloved musician, Raúl Paz. 1 The final book presentations – with theatre, dance and visual arts – occurred in Havana, June 8, 9 and 14. They are “wandering dialogues: for connection with feelings”.



Ernesto Limia's *Cuba: the end of history?*
(Source: Cubadebate)

Limia argues that the international left has failed to replace post modernism. It justifies globalized greed, claiming there's no truth, just myths and fictions. As long as my life feels right to me, I am living well. After all, “there's only one life.”

James Williams (Oxford University), winner of the prestigious Nine Dots Prize in Information Technology, argues that the goal of new technologies is to distract us. 2 That's what they compete to do: dominate our attention. Yet if asked, no one admits *wanting* their attention so dominated.

We might wonder why this argument is novel.

One of the first acts of the new revolutionary government in Cuba, after taking power in 1959, was to create an institute for film and television. People had to see themselves, to tell

their own stories. Since the start of the Cuban Revolution, culture, including philosophy, has had priority.

The insight is that without cultivating sensitivity and critical awareness through culture, our thinking is dominated by forces we don't understand, or even identify. Castro said in Caracas 1998,

"They discovered smart bombs. We discovered that people think and feel."

He didn't mean short-lived feelings of pleasure generated by trillion dollar industries promoting glamour and sensuality.

Post-modernist culture takes feelings at face value. It ignores, as Limia, argues, that every new bit of fun and pleasure carries with it deadeningly dehumanizing values: consumerism, exaltation of self-image, gain as the measure of all things.

Williams quotes Aldous Huxley: Defenders of freedom in the US ignored our almost infinite appetite for distraction. José Martí, leader of Cuba's last independence war against Spain, didn't ignore it. He couldn't, knowing imperialism as he did.

But it wasn't just appetite for distraction he worried about. It was Liberalism's glorification of appetite into a view of freedom. In his famous "Our America", Martí claimed a bigger barrier to independence (than the colossal neighbour to the north) was a false idea of what it means to learn. Writing books is relatively easy. The harder task, Martí wrote, is forming people.

It is done through cultural institutions, the *creation* of humanist values like solidarity. It is what the wandering dialogues are advocating. Martí said elsewhere that the only way to be free to realize unique human potential is through culture, in his broad sense, including education toward sensitivity.



Cuba 2017 International Book Fair opens in Havana (Source: CubaSi)

This year, at the iconic Havana Book Fair, there were brand-name T-shirts. Despite a culture of anti-capitalist resistance developed for 60 years, Cuba cannot escape the onslaught of capitalist values. The point to note, though, is that there are questions: Such values are discussed, and seriously challenged.

Students and teachers at the wandering dialogues want the educational system to better use students' creativity to counter the smothering apathy of elite pseudo-culture. They want to take up the reins of transformative culture that can nurture young people toward genuine human response.

In a square near the University of Havana is a large replica of Don Quixote. Some on the left say Cuba should now give up chasing windmills. Cubans should not bear the "burden" of keeping impossible dreams alive.

Cuba: the end of history? shows the "burden" is more than two centuries old. Félix Varela, a priest, began transforming the educational system in the early nineteenth century. He

insisted on observation, experience and creativity as foundations for philosophy. He wanted independence for Cuba.

Cuba has resisted world empires. In Varela's time, there were four: Spain, the UK, the US and the "necessary evil" of slavery. Varela inspired generations of students to take seriously, for politics, the need to *create* philosophy, from experience. Otherwise, imperialism would think *for* them.

This is what Cuban students discussed in the wandering dialogues. It is expression of a centuries-old struggle for freedom. It opposes the distorted liberal/libertarian view that individuals somehow, mythically, "seize our destiny", by looking "within", following dreams, because they're ours.

For some, persuaded there are only myths and fictions, none true just all different, the wandering dialogues are like Don Quixote's strange mixture of "madness and intelligence". And they'll decide, as many did about the man of the Mancha, that it is more madness than intelligence.

But the domination of liberalism and post-modernism, infecting even much feminism, queer theory and academic marxism, means there is not a lot to choose from in what is considered philosophy in the distracted, dominated, "developed" North. It might not be so bad to consider windmills.

Susan Babbitt is author of Humanism and Embodiment (Bloomsbury 2014) and José Martí, Ernesto "Che" Guevara and Global Development Ethics (Palgrave MacMillan 2014).

Notes

1. "Conectados, dialogando", <http://lajiribilla.cu/articulo/conectados-dialogando>
2. CBC FM 1 "Spark", June 7 2017

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