

It's Not All About Trump: Imperialism's Deep Lies are Known to Many

By [Prof Susan Babbitt](#)

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Recently seen as dangerous and incompetent, Trump has now “done what needed to be done”. It doesn’t matter that, as former Brazilian president Lula da Silva noted, “They invaded Iraq, killed Hussein, and until this day have found no chemical weapons”. Trump is now “presidential”. The deceit is barely worth mentioning on Telesur (Caracas) and Cubadebate (Havana).

They use the word “empire” to explain what empires do: Conquer. It means they don’t waste time asking why, from the first Bush to Clinton, the second Bush, and Obama, US presidents invade, destroy and occupy, relying on lies. On *Telesur*, Trump is part of a long history of imperial lies.

Some are about freedom and what it means. The deep lies are hard to talk about in North America. Yet there’s a trendy new debate in US Academia, about “epistemic injustice”. It refers to how systemic discrimination affects how people think, including how we identify ourselves. It’s about freedom of thought. We can fail to understand our own aspirations, even our humanity or the humanity of others.

It affects perpetrators as well as victims. US academics invented the term, building careers on it. Students line up to write theses. Yet the idea isn’t new. It occurred to non-radical priests in Cuba at the start of the nineteenth century. ¹ They gave it a different name: Imperialism. Priests, before Marx, knew our most intimate thinking depends on circumstances and conditions, even global ones.

They knew imperialism creates what Fidel Castro called “*sobrantes*”, or left-overs: People who don’t count. Simón Bolívar understood the supposedly new idea two centuries ago. It explained why Europeans’ talk about rights and freedoms was useless in Latin America. It didn’t apply to those “even lower than servitude”: *sobrantes*. They couldn’t claim such rights and freedoms. They weren’t human.

Che Guevara understood it too. He argued that freedoms in Cuba – including individual freedoms – required radical transformation of social and political institutions, which inform thinking. Freedom, he said, is a narrow dialectic, dependent on direction. At the Fourth Party Congress (1997), Castro said, “If we lose direction, we lose everything”. He knew injustice. He didn’t need a fancy new bit of jargon.

It is not easy to grasp this aspect of imperialism, so clear to *independentistas*: its effect on thinking. I thought of this recently on encountering two moving accounts of the “Yankee *comandante*”, hero of the Cuban revolution, executed as a traitor. ² William Morgan was a highly intelligent social misfit from Ohio who joined the guerrilla struggle against the

dictator, Fulgencio Batista, in Cuba in the fifties.

Arriving in the Escambray Mountains, he lost 35 pounds, learned Spanish and gained the rebels' respect. He became a commander, confidante of Fidel Castro. Morgan was one of two foreign commanders. Che Guevara, Argentinian, was the other. Morgan disliked Guevara, a Marxist. He liked Castro, who waited almost 2 ½ years after Batista's defeat to declare socialism. Morgan's support died there.

The story is of a young man who became the person he wanted to be in Cuba, fighting for freedom. He wrote to his mother that he joined the Cuban Revolution because "the most important thing for free men to do is to protect the freedom of others." We are led to conclude that the Cuban Revolution renounced freedom once Batista was gone: Morgan was supposedly executed for believing in it.

Even if true, it is an uninteresting conclusion. It commits an error we used to call, in Philosophy classes, "begging the question": If you declare your own view of freedom correct, you can dismiss opponents by claiming they are not talking about freedom. Or, you start with a liberal view of democracy, notice Cuba has one party, and conclude it is undemocratic because it doesn't fit your view.

It's bad argument. It's also missed opportunity. You win by dismissing the opposition, denying it exists. By the time Morgan was fighting for freedom, entire traditions, from throughout the continent, had discredited the idea of freedom he took for granted: the so-called negative view of freedom promoted by liberals to this day. It's the idea, roughly, that we're free if we can do what we want, within limits.

The truth about William Morgan is that he fought for freedom but didn't know what it was. He didn't know, for instance, that you can't be free when your fellows are *sobrantes*. It's not possible. We are interdependent creatures by nature. It's not ethics. It's science. Morgan couldn't know what freedom was because of US propaganda. He had little chance of asking what *human* freedom really meant.

It's hard to know whether the Cuban Revolution fell short of its ideals in Morgan's case. In Canada and the US, failure to respect human rights and freedoms is considered an error, to be investigated and learned from. Cuba isn't given that consideration. Any error, if it is an error (and we usually can't know because relevant counter arguments are dismissed), means the whole system is wrong.

It is an impoverished approach that limits freedom of thought. It shuts out options before they're even identified. I'd like to think the "epistemic injustice" folk will take issue with national myths about freedom, so cherished they are almost impossible to question. It wouldn't be bad to start with stories about Cuba. Just acknowledging there *could* be a question about what freedom means is useful.

The challenge of stories is that how they are heard depends on what people believe. Certain stories, even if told, are not heard. Being unexpected, they do not "read well". Hence the challenge for those pretending to present Cuba "objectively" by telling stories. Perhaps, Trump will force the rethinking of (false) national myths. Or, we can take seriously those already raising such questions since long ago.

Notes

1. Félix Varela, José de la Luz y Caballero and their colleagues.
2. David Grann, "The Yankee Commandante: A story of love, revolution, and betrayal", *The New Yorker*, May 28 2012; "American Comandante", written, produced and directed by Adriana Bosch, aired November 17, 2015, PBS
3. I say "used to" because news analysts use this term now to mean raising a question.

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

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