

Why Don Quixote? Solidarity and Cuba's "Medical Internationalism"

By [Prof Susan Babbitt](#)

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The World Health Organization honored Cuba's Henry Reeve Brigade in 2017.[i] Named after a US internationalist, its 48,000 health care workers throughout the South are more than all the rich countries combined. The Brigade has treated 3.5 million people in 21 countries since Fidel Castro created it in 2005.

Some think Cuba's medical internationalism an impossible dream. Not for a poor country, they say. Don Quixote is honored in Cuba. A large replica dominates a square near the University of Havana.

But *Don Quixote* is often misunderstood, at least in the North. It is not about impossible dreams.

The word "anarchy" pops up these days, along with "seize your destiny", "imagine", "create". Those following dreams are compared to the Man of the Mancha. We admire them, as if they are courageous, taking risks for an ideal.

Yet Victor Hugo noticed that even revolutionaries resist Don Quixote. They'd rather be Leonidas, with victory assured. Their visions, Hugo writes, are "illusions ... [of] human certainty".

It was not so with Don Quixote. His appealing mixture of "madness and intelligence", whatever else it was, did not expect certainty. He charged windmills and herds of sheep. But his "madness" was not the straight and narrow.

Cuba has exported solidarity. The US, in contrast, exports ignorance. In 1961, at an economics conference, Che Guevara showed how it works.^[ii] President Kennedy said the US development program "Alliance for Progress" was about democracy. He didn't define the term. It was defined by power.

Guevara knew "democracy", the US view, was an expectation. No other view was permitted. The *demo* in "democracy" is supposed to mean people. Guevara knew *people* were not permitted, at least not Latin American ones. He said so at the meeting. Cuba was expelled.

Expectations arise from practises. If I live in a white society, I expect people to be white. A non-white person becomes "different". I don't admit to thinking people are white. But because of social practises, I have that expectation.

Expectations are useful. I expect heat to burn and withdraw my hand. I may not know the physics but my expectation arises from practises, some scientific. It is reliable. Some expectations, though, are arbitrary, defined only by power.

It explains ignorance about the Henry Reeves Brigade and what it means for democracy and human rights.

The great US novel *Moby-Dick* is about expectations. It is supposed to be about US democracy because of multiplicity of perspectives. The ship includes Queequeg, a cannibal with strange rituals and beliefs, one of the nicest characters on the boat.

But *Moby Dick* is a US book because of expectations: for certainty. It is about Captain Ahab's vengeful pursuit of a whale. But it is also about Ishmael, the narrator, who seeks meaning. Ishmael is central *because* he seeks meaning. Standing watch at the masthead, he takes the "mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of the deep, blue bottomless soul pervading mankind and nature".

Some say the search for meaning is a human propensity. Ishmael contemplates the "almighty forlornness" of human beings in nature. He seeks meaning in the whale, its face (which it doesn't have), its ears and tail.

But we search for what we want to know. We don't just look for meaning. We look for *some* meaning. It starts with a question, a set of values, a worldview.

Ishmael cannot know the whale. "Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep. I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head". Yet Ishmael wouldn't say the whale *cannot* be understood if there were no expectation it *might* be understood.

Moby-Dick, the novel, is about how Ahab's expectation for superiority over nature fails and how Ishmael, unlike Ahab, accepts the failure. But expecting such superiority is itself surprising, or should be.

Human beings are part of the mysterious and complex unfolding of the universe. Our existence is insecure and, ultimately, unpredictable. We know this from science. Causation is complex, even chaotic. Human beings are subject to such causation.

Smart, sensitive philosophers from across the ages, and across the globe, say the art of dying and the art of living are the same. The reason is simple: All life, including human life, involves decay. Every moment involves change, which is loss. But as Victor Hugo notes, even revolutionaries want certainty.

He calls it the "blind, iron horse of the straight and narrow". Following dreams is that blind horse. It is following expectations, arbitrary ones, arising from a single, powerful society, a set of values, a worldview. They are followed in ignorance: of expectations, arbitrary ones.

Don Quixote is not about impossible dreams. It is about rationality. Don Quixote wasn't driven by an "inner voice", nourished by himself, seeking security that doesn't exist. However considered, the Man of the Mancha *had* a vision. He studied and lived it.

Guevara said that thinking freely and creatively is a "close dialectical unity" between individuals and the vision. There has to be vision, direction and leadership. It cannot be otherwise because of the role of expectations, generated by social practises. In a dehumanizing world, they must be transformed.

The role of expectations, rooted in practises, is well known in the philosophy of science. But it is ignored in political philosophy, especially liberal political philosophy, but also anarchism, even sometimes in academic Marxism.

It means reliance upon dreams, imagination, creativity, can only ever be conservative if there is no vision, no direction, no leadership. Cuba has had a vision, more urgent now than ever. The Henry Reeves Brigade is just part.

Ana Belén Montes had that vision.^[iii] She's in jail, in the US, under harsh conditions. Please sign [petition here](#).

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

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Notes

[i] <http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2017/05/27/organizacion-mundial-de-la-salud-entrega-importante-premio-a-brigada-henry-reeve/#.Wi-ToVWnHIV>

[ii] Inter-American Economics and Social Council of the Organization of American States (OAS) at Punta del Este, Uruguay.

[iii] <http://www.prolibertad.org/ana-belen-montes>. For more information, write to the cnc@canadiannetworkoncuba.ca or cincoheroes@listas.cujae.edu.cu

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