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www.afgazad.com

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by SUSAN BABBITT
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90 Years After the Birth of Che Guevara



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Last week was the 90th anniversary of the birth of Che Guevara. He was a revolutionary. But he was also a philosopher. The latter is not well-known. He argued with the Soviets about motivation. Che said human beings are not motivated by televisions and cars, at least not for tasks that matter.

Capitalist economists now say he was right, although they don't give him credit.^[1] For simple, uninteresting challenges, we act for gain. But for tasks of sacrifice, discovery and

creation, material gain is often irrelevant. Moral incentives, Che said, are what drive us to change the world.

He meant “moral” in a broader sense than mere cultivation of virtue. He meant the experience of growth as a human being: realization of essentially human capacities, emotional and intellectual.

European philosophers had a silly view about straight lines. They said having reasons depends upon having ends: Know what you want and find ways to get it. Some even say you can’t live without ends: something to look forward to. They call it hope.

I wrote a doctoral dissertation on this view, called “instrumental rationality”. It wasn’t because I was interested in it. I wanted to know why it interested academic philosophers. It was really the only view out there, in analytic philosophy.

It rules out discovery, the kind Che knew was necessary for anti-imperialists – discovery of humanness.

I thought about Che when I read Ramzy Baroud’s powerful book, *The Last Earth: A Palestinian Story* (Pluto 2018). The book is personal stories of catastrophe, by generations of Palestinians, in the Middle East and abroad. Joe Catron is the only non-Palestinian in the book. In a crucial way, his story is central.

Joe is from Hopewell, Virginia. Yet the Palestinians’ struggle is his. He discovers this. He goes to Gaza for a few days and stays years. He stays through two wars. Death hangs over Joe like it hangs over Gazans. But Joe feels alive. He learns that it is not *his* death he cares about.

As a human shield at the El_Wafa Medical Rehabilitation centre, with 12 critical patients who can’t be moved, bombarded for days, Joe Catron goes from being “an activist with many questions and few answers to ... a man, still with few answers but with a clear sense of a calling”.

It wasn’t an end he’d defined for himself back in Hopewell, Virginia, and then set out to achieve, following a plan. No straight lines explain the relevance and depth of what Joe understands and acquires in Gaza. As he describes it, what happens to him in Gaza is, quite simply, friendship.

It changes him. It is moral incentive. When Che refers to *el hombre nuevo* (the new person), he means, in part at least, what happens to Joe: awareness of dependence on others, and direction based on that dependence. Joe doesn’t collect information about tunnels, political groups and strategies, as other foreigners in Gaza were doing. His “clear sense of a calling” is the person he becomes.

A recent best-seller tells us to abandon self-help books and read novels.^[ii] The author is interviewed around the world. It shows how desperately the North needs ideas from the South and East: philosophical ones. The self-help industry is about straight lines: Find a formula for how to live, and you'll be happy.

It doesn't work. We learn this from good literature. Literature shows us the human condition: insecure, contradictory, and constantly decaying. When we acquire such awareness, we're stronger. We have more compassion. We see our reality *as it is*, and we are not alone.

But that's been the message of countless wise philosophers, from across the globe, and throughout the ages, including Che. They didn't tell us *notto* bother with straight lines. The idea never occurred to them in the first place. It doesn't make sense. Europeans *invented* that idea.

Brilliant Cuban politician and academic, Raúl Roa, in 1953, opens his *Viento sur (Wind from the South)* with an echo of Marx's "A specter is haunting Europe": "A wind blows in the south", Roa writes. No straight lines, no formulae, no pills can save us from existential complexity.

But we can face that reality, with *conciencia* (awareness).

Che told medical students in 1960: "If we all use the new weapon of solidarity ... then the only thing left for us is to know the daily stretch of the road and to take it. Nobody can point out that stretch; that stretch in the personal road of each individual; it is what he will do every day, what he will gain from his individual experience ... dedicated to the people's well-being." ^[iii]

Why is it a marvellous new revelation that we should learn to feel – through literature, for instance – rather than seek out formulae to know who we are and how to live? Fidel Castro said in Caracas in 1998, "They discovered 'smart weapons' but we discovered something more powerful: that people think and feel".

It's not trivial. The *Viento Sur* is more useful than best selling self-help books warning us, again, about self-help. If we know the world, that is, if we discover what we did not know before, and if we learn how to live well in that world, humanly, it is because of capacity for connection, not because we can identify and follow straight lines: *el hombre nuevo*. If we believe in science, there's no other way.

Notes.

^[i] Pink, Dan (2010). The surprising truth about motivation. *RSA Animate*.

^[ii] Svend Brinkman, *Stand firm* (Polity 2017)

[iii] Speech to medical students and health workers. In David Deutschman (Ed.), *The Che Guevara Reader: Writings on guerilla strategy, politics and revolution* (NY: Ocean Press, 1997) 104