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## Maduro: Glimmering Brake on Rhinoceritis



Drawing by Nathaniel St. Clair

Ignacio Ramonet, French author and journalist, former editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, sat recently with Nicholas Maduro.<sup>[1]</sup> Ramonet has known four Venezuelan presidents. In Miraflores, Caracas, seat of government, people converse, debate, talk on the phone and wait. All is normal.

Visitors, business folk, journalists, civil servants, ministers and their aides pass through the corridors. Ramonet has not met Maduro since December. Since then, the US has attacked Venezuela more aggressively than in the country's history.

Maduro is calm. He has shown himself to be a tranquil leader. No minister has left his government. No commanding general has deserted. No rupture has occurred in the civic-military alliance. Ramonet and Maduro discuss all this. Maduro says: “Only dialogue can resolve the crisis. ... Between Venezuelans of good will, we can find solutions without violence”.

We expect Maduro to be a raving tyrant. We may dismiss Ramonet.

Occasionally, precisely the unexpected creates imagination. It happened to Leroy Jones in 1960. He went to Cuba and returned politicized. In his widely reprinted “Cuba Libre”, he credits a “thin crust of lie we cannot even detect in our thinking”.

He noticed it because of surprise. People were normal, tranquil, interesting, like Maduro. Jones looked for explanations, not just for why Cubans were as they were, but why he’d expected otherwise. He discovered the “thin crust of lie”.

It’s not so thin.

It is who we are. Ionesco made this point in “Rhinoceros” (1959). When members of a French town become rhinoceroses, others are horrified. But as more become rhinos, villagers are seduced. Even the town’s philosopher wants to “move with the times”. Eventually, only one man, Berenger, remains human. Berenger is now the monster.

He reassures himself: A “man’s not ugly to look at, not ugly at all!”. But a few sentences later, he says, “I should have gone with them while there was still time”.

Berenger thinks rhinocerositis is “disgusting” but he might go with the rhinos because, after all, rhinocerositis is not as big a problem as identifying it as a problem, once everyone is a monster.

I was reminded of this listening to a debate on CBC radio about free speech in Canadian universities. One speaker defended hate speech, saying freedom shouldn’t be limited. A second said freedom should be restricted because hate speech is damaging. A third argued for proper scholarship: Say what you want but back it up.

They agreed on freedom. Different politics, different scholarly backgrounds, but the same view. It’s a false view, easily discredited if the question is raised. But it is not raised.

We’re supposed to believe freedom is living “from within” by which is meant from the conscious mind: the conglomeration of desires, values and life plans we associate with

the self, or the sense of self. Meanings come from “within”: the “inner voice”. Except it’s not “inner”. It is caused: by the outside.

We live in a dialectical, causal relationship with the world and that’s how we know it. It acts upon us. This was Marx’s view, roughly, and Lenin and Gramsci developed it further. And it happens to be the view defended by some philosophers of science in North America in the 21st century.

They study knowledge and rationality. They defend realism, the view that we can know the world beyond our beliefs, not absolutely, of course.

Victor Hugo was a realist. Jean Valjean would have liked not to see the truth, but he knew it was ““better to suffer, to bleed, to tear your skin off with your nails ... [than to] never look openly, to squint”. He wrestled with an “implacable light [that] ... dazzled him by force when all he wanted was to be blind”.

The meaning-from-within view doesn’t recognize that light. The “inner voice” – being my self – is not something I can be “appalled and dazzled” by. I create it. No “implacable light” is an “an immense difficulty in being”, as it was for Valjean, if “being” is meaningful only from “within”.

It is a comfortable view of how to know right from wrong. We don’t. Valjean wrestled with truth that tore him apart, tortured him and broke him: “his conscience, standing over him, fearsome, luminous, tranquil”. “Standing over him” is what we call tyranny, despotism: something other than freedom.

It’s convenient. We live in a world in which 40% of the world’s population uses 80% of the resources, and in which the 40% — for the most part — accept the situation. We consider ourselves “lucky” or “privileged”. But when resources are stolen, the owners are not “lucky” or “privileged”. They are bad.

That is, morally bad. It is lucky we don’t believe in the category.

Some do. When I started reading philosophers from the South – those resisting imperialism and colonialism – I discovered they never asked whether there is truth about value, about humanness. They never doubted that we can know rhinoceritis for what it is because they did know it.

A PhD program at the University Havana, directed by the remarkable philosopher, Thalía Fung Riverón, studies ‘Political Science from the South’. It asks such questions: how to access the moral imagination that allows dehumanizing lies to be known and resisted.

Lenin said it must be “from below”, through those who’ve been colonized, imperialized, discarded.<sup>[2]</sup>

A point is missed by some trying to understand Venezuela. It was made by Fidel Castro in 2005 at a conference entitled “Latin America in the 21st century: Universality and Originality”. Revolutionary ideas, to be revolutionary, need not be accepted by all, or even most. But they must be lived by some.

Their examples generate questions that make moral imagination possible. It’s why Maduro matters. His tranquil resistance, if explained, makes imaginable what was not previously imaginable: other ways to think about freedom and how to be human.

Ionesco said his play was about tyranny: of convention. A certain view of freedom is precisely that.

**Notes.**

1) Cubadebate, 15 May 2019 ↑

2) E.g. Ciencia Política Enfoque Sur: Intromission en la participación política (Editorial Félix Varela, 2015) ↑

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