

# ART AND THE SUBJECT IN REVOLUTIONARY CUBA

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## Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which alternatives to capitalist social relations have manifested themselves in the cultural field in Cuba. Its approach is consistent with Don Mitchell's insistence on a "focus on the material development of the idea (or ideology) of culture" (1995: 102), insofar as culture is considered a central part of the ideological development of the Revolution. Cuba's multifaceted conception of culture is not confined to the field in which creative endeavours are undertaken. Creative activity is understood as a process of social production, with human happiness as its end product, which implicates culture in both education and emancipation. While considering the formation of new subjectivities through culture, this paper elaborates the huge effort that was made by the revolutionary government to ensure that both culture and creativity were accessible to all. In the process, it offers a glimpse of ways in which the traditionally discrete categories of artist and audience have been redefined.

**Key Words:** Cuba, arts, culture, creativity, social, socialism, subjectivity

## El arte y el sujeto en la Cuba revolucionaria

### Resumen

Este trabajo explora las formas en que las alternativas a las relaciones sociales capitalistas se han manifestado en el campo cultural en Cuba. Su enfoque es coherente con la insistencia de Don Mitchell

en "centrarse en el desarrollo material de la idea (o ideología) de la cultura" (1995: 102), en la medida en que la cultura se considera una parte central del desarrollo ideológico de la Revolución. La concepción multifacética de la cultura cubana no se limita al campo en que se emprenden los esfuerzos creativos. La actividad creativa se entiende como un proceso de producción social, con la felicidad humana como su producto final, lo que implica la cultura tanto en la educación como en la emancipación. Al considerar la formación de nuevas subjetividades a través de la cultura, este documento elabora el enorme esfuerzo que realizó el gobierno revolucionario para asegurar que tanto la cultura como la creatividad sean accesibles para todos. En el proceso, ofrece una vislumbre de formas en que las categorías tradicionalmente discretas de artista y público han sido redefinidas.

**Palabras clave:** Cuba, arte, cultura, creatividad, social, socialismo, subjetividad

## Revolution and Renovation

Contemporary Cuban conceptions of culture gestated in the belly of insurrection. During the trial for his part in the ill-fated 26 July 1953 assault on two army barracks at the south eastern tip of the island – which triggered the insurrection and gave the nascent movement its name – Fidel Castro identified a need for massive educational reform. Elaborating on this, the first manifesto of the 26 July Movement – issued while Fidel and his brother, Raúl, were exiled in Mexico after a period of imprisonment for the barracks attacks – pointed to the essential "extension of culture,

preceded by reform of all methods of teaching, to the furthest corner of the country in such a way that every Cuban has the possibility of developing their mental and physical aptitudes” (26 July Movement 1955). In this way, education was regarded as both precursor and corollary to culture in the sense of the arts and literature.

Returning to Cuba in 1956, the revolutionary leaders coordinated a guerrilla strategy from the densely forested terrain of the Sierra Maestra mountains for just under two years, with the aim of restoring sovereignty to Cuba after centuries of colonial and neocolonial rule. At the opposite tip of the island, in Havana, musicians, filmmakers, artists and members of the Cuban Communist Party speculated upon ways in which culture could be democratised, while mounting creative resistance to the brutal and elitist US-backed dictatorship of General Fulgencio Batista, whom the Revolution sought to depose.

Within weeks of the *comandantes* marching victorious upon the capital and two years before any kind of ‘official’ cultural policy was formulated, the revolutionary government enacted radical reforms in the cultural field, primarily through the restoration of existing cultural institutions and the creation of new ones. This is noteworthy in itself because the increasingly radicalised leadership more generally regarded institutionalisation and bureaucracy as a vehicle for orthodoxy and an impediment to the flux necessary to create an entirely new society (Kapcia 2014). Turning this logic on its head, the leadership entrusted key revolutionary figures with establishing cultural institutions capable of thwarting orthodoxy, a task they have perfected over subsequent decades by upholding Cuba’s internationalist, anti-imperialist ethos.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the revolutionary government explored the rhetoric of socialism and communism, toying with and eventually rejecting organisational forms inherited from the Soviet Union. In this volatile atmosphere, ideas around culture coalesced through an extensive process of trial and error in which several disparate approaches to

revolutionary culture vied for supremacy, often with disastrous results (Gordon-Nesbitt 2014a). Rather than dwelling on negotiations around cultural policy (Gordon-Nesbitt 2015), this paper is centred on the formation of the new revolutionary subject – which was actively invoked in Cuba – and the part played by the arts and literature in this process. The contrast with subjectivities developed under capitalism will be immediately obvious. Linkages between the process of subject formation and the type of social organisation being adopted in Cuba will also be self-evident, prompting observations about the extent to which individual and collective forms of subjectivity are linked to the society in which they emerge.

### Emancipation

The Cuban Revolution was imbued with what Fidel (2006: 99–100) would later call a “utopian Communism,” which combined a profound sense of injustice with a struggle for national liberation. Attempts to distinguish revolutionary Cuban ideology from Soviet-derived approaches often rely on the notion of “Martían Marxism,” which Ernesto “Che” Guevara is credited with having introduced into the constitution. This implies a Marxism inflected by the insistence of nineteenth-century Cuban poet and revolutionary José Martí that resistance to US imperialism should be mounted across “Our America.” It is indisputable that the ideas of Martí influenced the broader ideology of the Revolution from the outset and that the reconciliation of Martí and Marx would come to be regarded as alien to the dogmatism that had led to the installation of socialist realism in Europe, but documents pertaining to revolutionary cultural renovation refer not to Martían Marxism but to Marxist humanism. In March 1959, the first piece of revolutionary legislation pertaining to ideo-cultural activity (Cuban Government 1959: 152) would refer to “the new humanism inspiring the Revolution.”

Central to any consideration of Marxist humanism is the revolutionary objective of total human emancipation, elaborated by Marx and Engels (1846) in *The German Ideology*. This insists that political emancipation must be accompanied by its social equivalent, with both of these abstract concepts underwritten by

a detailed understanding of humanity. When unraveling the humanistic character of Cuban Marxism, the work of Argentinean writer and politician Aníbal Ponce is of particular relevance. In 1935, Ponce undertook a detailed study of the humanism that had arisen in the capitalist world, centred on a “conception of man in whom individuality implies absolute autonomy [...] detached from any social stratum, category or class,” to conclude that class society made the idea of a universal culture impossible (Troise 1969: 227). This bears a striking resemblance to Pierre Bourdieu’s later critique of artistic autonomy (1984), which claimed that, for artists in capitalist society, the approbation of a competitive peer group massively outweighed any public response to their work.

For Marx and Engels (1846), one of the key considerations in advancing emancipation was consciousness, which they understood to be grounded in a sensual awareness of one’s surroundings while at the same time transcending the instinctive to become a rational social product. Ponce proposed that culture might be understood as a form of social consciousness that encompassed individual consciousness. For him (Troise 1969: 283), the Russian Revolution paved the way for proletarian humanism, as a “consequence of the revolutionary process and the concomitant appearance of the new man.” This understanding of consciousness and proletarian humanism would underwrite the actions of the revolutionary government in the cultural field.

In the same year as the Rebel Army entered Havana, Ernst Fischer’s book, *The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach* was first published. Fischer speculated on art as a social experience, asserting (1959: 8) that “evidently man wants to be more than just himself. He wants to be a *whole* man. He is not satisfied with being a separate individual; [...] He wants to refer to something more than “I”, something outside himself and yet essential to himself.” The ideas of Ponce and Fischer, around consciousness and the new man, informed Che Guevara’s thinking at the heart of society under construction (Fernández Retamar 1971), on the basis of which Cubans were encouraged to participate holistically in the arts and literature.

### The New Cuban Subject

In considering the mechanisms of the Russian Revolution, the Ukrainian scholar Zenovia Sochor (1988) isolates two basic prerequisites for revolutionary success – de-legitimation of the existing regime and the emergence of a competing ideology. Opinion has historically been divided over the specifics of the second process – its timing (before, during or after the seizure of power), its trigger (whether ideological shifts would occur as a natural consequence of the changing socio-economic structure or need to be implemented extrinsically) and its tenets (whether the new ideology should be based on ideology, per se, or on class consciousness).

Whereas Marx had every faith in the ability of the proletariat to overcome false consciousness at the moment of revolutionary rupture, Lenin did not believe that this would happen spontaneously, which caused him to advocate the intervention of the party vanguard including its intellectuals. In the Soviet context, Sochor (1988: 3) observes that:

Among the problems facing revolutionary leaders, one of the most difficult is how to transform the attitudes, beliefs and customs inherited from the old society that hinder the creation of a new society. Clearly, there is no automatic change when power is seized; the population at large may have altered its expectations but not its familiar habits in work and social behavior. Yet without cultural transformation, the building of socialism may remain an evasive goal. Even when the political opposition has been subdued and economic development has at least been launched, the cultural sphere is not easily changed. Revolution and culture are pitted against each other.

During the insurrection in Cuba, a new revolutionary subject was seen to emerge among the peasants who took up arms alongside Fidel and his *compañeros* in the Sierra Maestra. Early in the subsequent process of redistribution and rebuilding, it became clear that this revolutionary outlook would need to be extended

to the rest of the population, and K.S. Karol (1970: 453) notes that:

Fidel knew that he could not give the moon to those who asked for it, nor even satisfy their much more real needs here and now. All he wanted was to make them conscious of these needs, and to persuade them to join him in seeking a fair solution. Fidel and his small group of *barbudos* [bearded men] thus set themselves a task after the Revolution which Lenin had long ago assigned to the Communist Party in order to make the revolution: to infuse the masses with class consciousness from without.

In Cuba, the vanguard of the Revolution was not the party – which remained a fragile alliance of competing interests for many years – but the revolutionary leaders.

Within the leadership, Che, who uniquely reconciled theory and practice, prioritised subjective over objective conditions when considering revolutionary success. In 1965, during his travels in the Congo, he wrote a letter to the editor of the Montevideo-based *Marcha* [Progress] magazine, which was published under the title of “Socialism and Man in Cuba.” This text articulated the need for an entirely new instrument “for mobilising the masses. Basically, this instrument must be moral in character, without neglecting, however, a correct use of the material incentive – especially of a social character.” In this way, a dialectical relationship was established between material and moral incentives as a prelude to mass participation in building the new society (Pogolotti 2006).

In an extended conversation, conducted around the time of Che’s missive, Fidel (Lockwood 1967: 24) would expand upon this:

Material incentives, though important as stimulus [sic], are not the most important factor. Most important is the moral incentive being felt by the people. These are the first fruits of socialism here. People used to think, before the Revolution, that work such as

cutting sugar cane was dirty – let others do it. But now they are beginning to understand and feel the true value of work itself. They are making their own future, and they see the results. With this has also come perhaps our most important accomplishment – the instillation in the people of a revolutionary consciousness.

In considering the consciousness-raising impetus in Cuba, it quickly became clear that the Revolution needed to consolidate itself in cultural transformation. Initially, as we have seen, culture was closely aligned with education, but it was quickly taken to embrace Raymond Williams’ (1958) dual definition of a whole way of life and the arts and learning, with a tendency to prioritise the latter over the former (Fernández Retamar 1966). The revolutionary government embraced literature and the arts, including film and architecture, as a vital part of the society it was working to create. At the same time, the notion of culture as artistic creation overflowed into conceptions of culture as part of a conscious process of historical construction with human growth as its ultimate purpose (Pogolotti 2006).

In January 1968, just a few months after Che’s assassination in Bolivia, the integral growth of man formed the second of five themes at the Cultural Congress of Havana. An estimated 644 participants from sixty-seven countries (including Cuba) descended upon the revolutionary capital to take part in discussions about the role of intellectuals in combating underdevelopment. Among them, the British playwright Arnold Wesker (1969: 15) observed that:

In Cuba they talk only about what Che Guevara called the ‘new man’ who will be for them, simply, the man whose personal and social incentives will be moral rather than material. Man will work not because his pay will increase but because his fulfilment [sic] as a human being is complete in knowing the degree to which he has contributed to the well being of his society; and this fulfilment [sic] will affect his personal relationships with his neighbour, making them richer; it will affect

his need and capacity for education and the enjoyment of art, making them natural and inevitable [...] they are actually looking at the acquisitive and competitive nature of man as we have believed it must always be and saying: he is like this only from centuries of conditioning and we are now going to completely change that conditioning.

While this account erroneously suggests that moral incentives had completely overshadowed material ones, it nonetheless captures the essence of Che's notion of voluntarism (which, in turn, must be distinguished from ostensibly similar initiatives in popular currency within the capitalist world). However, without taking part in the relevant week-long commission, Wesker (*Ibid*, 18) demanded:

What 'new man'? Surely there is and only ever was – man? And its [sic] because we have glimpsed at him, seen hints of him and guessed at his potential that we persist in trying to create societies where his true nature can emerge, can be revealed. Revealing is the operative word. There can be no 'new man', only the slow revealing of what man was always intended to be.

Although he correctly assumed that Cuba sought to encourage its subjects to fulfil their greatest potential, in confining his remarks to the individual, rather than the collective process through which this would be achieved, Wesker demonstrated a basic misunderstanding of the essential concept, in which 'new man' is shorthand for "new social relations."

During his internment between 1931 and 1935, Antonio Gramsci (1931–5: 107) elaborated on Lenin's concept of the new Soviet man to insist that new literature, ideology and superstructures would not occur spontaneously: "They are not generated through 'parthenogenesis' but through the intervention of the 'male' element, history, and the revolutionary activity which creates the 'new man,' that is, new social relations." While the gendered connotations of this statement seem incongruous today, Gramsci's analogy between spontaneous change and asexual reproduc-

tion retains some interest, as does his insistence that new subjectivities and inter-subjective relations must pave the way for social change. While Gramsci (1920: 42) envisaged schools to be the 'crucible where the new spirits will be forged', he argued (1921: 50) that "the battlefield for the creation of a new civilization is [...] absolutely mysterious." In Cuba, this battlefield revealed itself to be the cultural field.

Prefacing days of deliberation in Havana in 1968, the president of the republic, Dr. Osvaldo Dorticós Torrado (1968), emphasised the role of artists and writers in developing the personality of the new revolutionary man to which the country aspired. In this way, the Revolution embraced the function of creative intellectuals in heightening spiritual development and priming the people to meet their revolutionary duty. Félix Sautié (1968), a Catholic Cuban writer active on either side of the Revolution, took care to delineate what the term 'new man' concretely expressed – the prioritisation of collective over individual interest; motivation being found in the intimate satisfaction of participating in social work; the barriers between intellectual and manual work being erased and aesthetic and cultural development being considered equal to physical development.

In advocating creative participation within the same extended panel, the US writer Susan Sherman (1968) asserted that the new man would need to gain both objective and experiential knowledge of himself in order to achieve self-consciousness during the transition from object to subject, while being transformed by, and transforming, society. Within the same commission, the French poet and artist Alain Jouffroy (1968) affirmed that freedom of thought and mobility of the imagination would be required methods in the new man, as discipline and rigour were in the militant revolutionary.

In his closing speech to this pivotal event, Fidel (1968) asserted that the development of consciousness, society and culture would be a prerequisite for the island's economic and industrial emergence from underdevelopment and that the imperialist powers, reacting to growing inequality with ever-more repressive wars, would only serve to galvanise universal

revolutionary consciousness. Fidel also observed that – with the co-operation of the world’s intellectuals – the congress had made a significant contribution to the revolutionary movement, above all helping to refine the concept of the new man, by taking Che Guevara as an exemplar for the twenty-first century.

By the end of the decade, C. Ian Lumsden (1969: 539) would note that “Every domestic policy implemented by the Castro regime is ideologically linked to the creation of this new socialist consciousness.” At the same time, Fidel would marvel at the increase in voluntary labour in evidence throughout the 1960s, attributing this to raised consciousness and arguing that, as so many Cubans had responded to the call for collective labour, “new man” was no longer an empty phrase (Karol 1970). This new generation of socialists, it was hoped, would commit to a revolutionary struggle that aimed to free the underdeveloped world from its oppressors, which saw Cuba being placed at the vanguard of anti-imperialist struggle throughout Latin America and beyond (Fernández Retamar 1971).

In April 1971, the First National Congress of Education and Culture was convened in Havana. While the revolutionary fervour of 1968 had been misplaced by this time, for reasons articulated elsewhere (Gordon-Nesbitt 2015), the final congress declaration continued to advocate the full growth of man through the development of all the capacities that society was able to promote in him. Unsurprisingly given the occasion, education and culture were firmly implicated in this endeavour – including participation in all manifestations of art and literature – from primary level onwards (Santana 1977). By the time of the first congress of the revamped Cuban Communist Party (PCC) in 1975, which marked a new dawn for Marxist-humanist cultural policy, the thesis and resolutions categorically stated (Comité Central del PCC 1976: 492) that “Cultural level profoundly influences man, helping to determine conduct and having repercussions in forms of speech and customs. A high cultural level is absolutely necessary for our youth, especially in creating an unblemished love of our socialist cause.” In this way, it was maintained

(Ibid, 96), culture “would prepare the ideological terrain for the transformation of society.”

At this point, it is necessary to return to the beginning of this story, to consider the precise ways in which cultural participation was encouraged so as to facilitate the desired transformation of individuals and society.

### **Art as a Form of Social Production**

While a number of artists, writers and thinkers maintained some kind of praxis under the Batista regime, this was often carried out in a samizdat fashion and risked punitive measures. Before 1959, Cuban artists were dependent upon the whims of businessmen who commissioned work on the basis of private sales (CNC 1970). After 1959, the market was generally rejected as a planning device, and, within the cultural field, it could be claimed (CPC 1961: 4) that “Socialism is the first social regime that emancipates culture from the oppression of money, which means the artist can create not to satisfy the depraved tastes of a handful of gluttons but for the great mass of the people.” In cultural terms, the prioritisation of human over market interests had some profound consequences.

Cultural producers were declared free from economic insecurity, allowing them to pursue their art instead of having to rely on sales or earn a living from work other than their creative practice (Otero 1972). To this end, it was decided that creative practitioners should have a fixed income equal to other workers. At the First National Congress of Writers and Artists in August 1961, CNC Director of Culture at the National Council of Culture, Vincentina Antuña, mentioned numerous grants having been awarded to young artists and writers by the state. At the same event, those assembled decided the statutes for a new National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC), which would administer a Literary and Artistic Fund (UNEAC 1961).

The end of the 1960s saw the implementation of a plan to pay artists a salary and cover the cost of their materials, as part of a mutual agreement between

the artist and the state (CNC 1970). According to the Cuban writer Ambrosio Fornet, this meant that intellectuals “were able to create with total autonomy thanks to autonomous institutions and a type of patronage – state subsidy – free from the demands of bureaucracy like that of servitude to the market” (2004: 12). As a consequence of this approach, artists graduating during the 1960s and beyond had a ‘guaranteed place in society and [were] able to devote themselves to creative activities without any concerns or difficulties’ (Saruský and Mosquera 1979: 40). In return, many artists repaid the state as teachers, within a massively expanded network of art schools, or as designers of mass-produced books and periodicals. Artworks shed their commodity character, serving as a means of dissemination (through non-commercial posters and publications) or forming part of the national collection, with the state acting as both sponsor and collector.

Considering the process of guaranteeing artists and writers a viable income together with the notion that reprinting works from around the world could accelerate the country’s cultural development, Fidel (1967) proclaimed the abolition of copyright. At the same time, the revolutionary government renounced Cuba’s right to any intellectual property accrued within its borders, on the understanding that provision would be made for those who had previously relied for their survival on royalties from creative work. Convinced of the national and international significance of this stance, artists and writers relinquished the commercial rights to their work, in return for increased recognition within society and the value inherent in the creative act (Llanusa and Dorticós 1967; Sánchez Vázquez 1970).

At a stroke, the floodgates were open to the liberal reproduction of classic works of literature, sociology, anthropology and economics, freely disseminated around the island in Spanish-language editions, famously including 100,000 copies of *Don Quixote*. At the same time, the renunciation of copyright on Cuban works reinforced the material reliance of writers upon the state. Lourdes Casal concedes, however, that ‘the importance of such a change can be easily overestimated abroad, where royalties are an essential part of

the writer’s incentive system. In Cuba, even after the new publishing structures eliminated the need [...] for self-financed editions, royalties did not represent a significant income for most authors’ (1971: 457).

The dissociation of artists from the market economy is consistent across internal and external documents, with Cuba being described as the only country in Latin America to accept art as a form of social production (Saruský and Mosquera 1979). This not only implied freedom from material constraints on the part of artists; it also entailed a contribution to the process of forging society. From a situation characterised by social uselessness, Cuba’s politicised intellectuals came to regard their intervention in public affairs as not only a possibility but also an obligation.

The Spanish-born Mexican Marxist aesthetician Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, whose lectures would prove useful to Cuban intellectuals in the 1960s, broached the logical gap between Marxist humanism and cultural production to argue (1965: 10) that “artistic creation and aesthetic gratification presupposed, in Marx’s eyes, the specifically human appropriation of things and of human nature that is to prevail in [...] a society that will mark humanity’s leap from the realm of necessity into that of true freedom.” Accordingly, creativity was recognised as playing an essential part in the struggle for dignity, and Fidel affirmed that, like any other workers, artists and writers would have to create wealth, which, in their case, would be measured in terms of the boundless happiness their work produced (UNEAC 1961).

Having considered the impact of the Revolution upon professional artistic circles, let us turn our attention to the ways in which the revalidation of culture manifested itself in society more broadly.

### **The Reconciliation of Art and Society**

Even before socialism had been explicitly adopted by the revolutionary government, a socially consequential role for art had been embraced by its producers. In November 1960, the country’s artists and writers issued a manifesto aligning themselves with the Revolution and its people. In August 1961,

Cuba's creative practitioners came together again and took as one of their discussion topics "Mutual reconciliation between writers, artists and the people" (UNEAC 1961:10). Later, the first formal interpretation of the government's position on culture would build upon the conclusions of this congress to state that "In socialist society, it is logical to aspire for writers and artists to have intimate contact with life" (CNC 1963: n.p.).

Belfiore and Bennett (2008) situate contemporary considerations of cultural value in the capitalist world alongside historical attempts to refute Plato's conception of culture as a corrupting influence. Since antiquity, they observe, the arts have consistently been harnessed to the maintenance of social order, through the reinforcement of class divisions and the provision of moral education. Considering the instrumentalisation of culture to the betterment of society under socialism, Fidel would elaborate: "I don't think there has ever existed a society in which all the manifestations of culture have not been at the service of some cause or concept." In the specific case of Cuba, he believed (Lockwood 1967: 111), "Our duty is to see that the whole is at the service of the kind of man we wish to create [...] the content of any artistic work of any kind – its very quality for its own sake, without its necessarily having to carry a message – can give rise to a beneficial and noble feeling in the human being." Central to this assertion is the idea that the Revolution would bring about human emancipation and that active engagement with culture would help pave the way for this transformation. At the same time, in emphasising the inherent properties of artworks, the leader of the Cuban Revolution successfully exempted them from the didactic aims that were being enforced in orthodox circles (Gordon-Nesbitt 2014a).

During a speech in June 1961, which set the parameters of cultural policy for the following decade, Fidel (1961: 19) outlined:

just as we want a better life for the people in the material sphere, so do we want a better life for the people in a spiritual and cultural sense. And just as the Revolution is concerned with the development of the conditions and

forces that will permit the people to satisfy all their material needs, so do we also want to create the conditions that will permit the people to satisfy all their cultural needs.

As explored below, this implied not only (passive) appreciation of but also (active) engagement in creative practice as a necessary step towards building a better world foreshadowed by human desire. In this regard, a second highly instructive point to be taken from *The German Ideology* is the rejection of the Romantic idea of creative activity being confined to unique individuals working within constrained disciplines, which is taken to rely upon the suppression of artistic talent in the broader populace (Marx and Engels 1846). By contrast, in a society in which hierarchies are being broken down, the Cuban leadership envisaged that the latent creativity of all the people should be encouraged, giving free rein to creative excellence.

Gramsci (1949) had earlier elaborated an anti-elitist conception of culture, proposing that, as everyone is capable of engaging in intellectual labour, the category of "intellectual" did not rely on some intrinsic property of mental activity. Rather, a selective process was undergone within class society, through which certain intellectuals were favoured at the expense of others. From this, the revolutionary idea emerged that intellectual capacity needed to be encouraged across society. In Cuba, where the leadership generally assumed that access to education and culture would play a vital part in lifting the populace from underdevelopment as part of the desired shift to classless society, Gramsci's evocations were enthusiastically taken up, with education being made available to all strata of society at the same time as attempts were made to erode those strata.

In January 1961, the aforementioned National Council of Culture (CNC) was established by the revolutionary government to implement its cultural policy. The CNC laid the foundations for mass participation in culture, arguing (CPC 1961: 1) that "The socialist regime converts culture into a profoundly democratic instrument and makes it the patrimony of the whole society and not one reduced to the layer of intellectuals." Consistent with Gramsci's conceptions



and Cuban approaches to education and culture more broadly, a pamphlet written for UNESCO (Saruský and Mosquera 1979: 21) explained that “persons with creative abilities should develop their gifts and individuality to the full, and [...] the work of writers and artists should contribute to the endeavour of social and personal liberation to which socialism is committed.” In December 1962, the CNC established a two-pronged strategy for tackling the gap between art and the people. This proposed that, in order to overcome the unequal access to culture that had been inherited from the previous regime, the most representative artistic and literary expressions of every epoch should be disseminated at the same time as direct participation in cultural production was encouraged (CNC 1963).

With regard to cultural appreciation, the CNC implemented a programme of activities (Gordon-Nesbitt 2014b), and, in the first half of 1963, almost half the population visited a concert, theatrical performance, museum, exhibition or similar. Building on the success of the 1961 literacy campaign – which taught the vast majority of the illiterate population to read and write – cultural activists took appreciation of art into the countryside, giving talks, organising conferences and explaining works of theatre, dance and music to those living in rural areas. At the same time, a system of mobile cinemas – 112 pulled by lorry, twenty-two drawn by animals and two carried by boat around the coast – took films to the furthest reaches of the island, helping to erode the cultural disparity between urban and rural areas. At the same time, the revolutionary government mobilised a well-established broadcasting apparatus to bring cultural programmes to an extensive network of private television sets.

As increased appreciation of the arts was being stimulated, Fidel invoked the “conversion of the people from spectators into creators” (1961: 32). Within two weeks of revolutionary victory, Che Guevara had set up a school in the large La Cabaña fortress (Chanan 2003), and Fidel retrospectively explained (2006: 202) that his late comrade had “wanted his first action as a military commander to be putting in place his literacy programme and teaching all combatants”. Building on this initiative in 1961, the National Institute of

Agrarian Reform (INRA), under Che’s direction, created a School for Arts Instructors. Following an extensive series of discussions, this was replaced with a boarding school, run by the CNC, at which training costs were covered and students paid wages for the duration of their courses (Otero 1972). This formed the basis of a major initiative to train tens of thousands of arts instructors.<sup>1</sup>

After two years of training, arts instructors returned to their places of origin to disseminate the skills they had learnt, “allowing the people to channel their artistic vocations and to develop their aesthetic perceptions” (CNC 1963: n.p.). In 1975, Fidel reprised the work of the CNC in this area, commenting on the massive expansion from 1,164 amateur artistic groups in 1964 to more than 18,000 groups realising 120,000 creative projects a decade later (PCC 1976). It is estimated that, at its peak, this programme led to the creation of up to a million amateur artists in a population of around seven million (Kapcia 2005). And, while the distinction between amateur and professional artists has been maintained within the structures established for creative education, provision exists for the transition of the most gifted amateurs into the professional ranks.

Such attempts to diminish the gap between art and society in Cuba have far-reaching consequences. In the capitalist world, the late eighteenth-century shift to a market economy coincided with the inception of aesthetic theory. This saw Kant (1790) positing aesthetics as a realm of enquiry distinct from both

1 Teacher-training courses were open to entrants aged between fifteen and twenty-five, providing they had finished the fourth grade of primary school. These young instructors were trained in theatre, popular music, modern dance and the plastic arts, with inter-disciplinarity being encouraged and professional practitioners implicated in the process of training art instructors. By 1963, 1,500 people had registered as instructors, initially selected from people’s farms and popular zones to study in the capital; by 1975, forty-seven schools were providing artistic education courses, with 5,000 Cubans studying to become instructors (PCC, 1976). By the end of the decade, a UNESCO report refers (Saruský and Mosquera, 1979: 14) to 40,000 young people being offered scholarships to undertake a “two-year training course to enable them to promote the various forms of artistic expression in the previously utterly neglected rural areas.”

practical reason (moral judgement) and understanding (scientific knowledge), to form a necessary but problematic bridge between the two. Terry Eagleton (1990) has convincingly argued that this imposition of theory onto a potentially liberating, sensual realm formed part of a deliberate attempt to engender the social cohesion necessary to capitalist societies grounded in consensus and economic individualism. As an antidote to the aloofness of Kantian aesthetics, the Italian art critic, Mario de Micheli (1967) – whose work on the European artistic vanguards of the twentieth century would be published in Cuba in the 1960s – cited Hegel's invocation that artistic work should be created with the people in mind.

In the context of this discussion, it is interesting to distinguish De Micheli's use of the term "vanguard" (which was enthusiastically taken up in Cuba) from that of "avant-garde" (which emerged in capitalist Europe). While notions of the vanguard retained their militaristic, socio-political roots, the avant-garde rejected bourgeois cultural tradition from the relative safety of aesthetic terrain (Buck-Morss 1977). In Cuba, a shared commitment to change established a necessary link between political and artistic vanguards (Pogolotti 2006). The Uruguayan novelist, poet and journalist Mario Benedetti (1969) observed that, much quicker than in European socialist countries, the political and aesthetic vanguards reached a state in which they could fertilise one another, and Fernet would later reflect upon how "the Revolution – the real possibility to change life – appeared to us as a political expression of the artistic aspirations of the vanguard" (2007: 382–3).

In considering early twentieth century Western Europe, Peter Bürger (1974) distinguishes an historical avant-garde, centred on Dada and Surrealism, the explicit aim of which was the elision of art with the praxis of life. For him, this project failed, serving only to reassert the autonomy of art within bourgeois society. In much the same way, the appearance of a neo-avant-garde, centred on a critique of the institution of art in the US from the late 1960s, ultimately did little to narrow the gap between art and society. In a reversal of the experience of the historical avant-garde, Cuban practitioners have largely left aesthetic

regimes unchanged, integrating vernacular elements into the canon rather than challenging the Western (capitalist) aesthetic mainstream (Camnitzer 1994). But, by maintaining the aim of breaking down the barriers between practitioners and the people, the Cuban experiment has realised itself in the most ambitious reconciliation of art and society to have taken place to date. Herein lies the area of revolutionary cultural policy with the greatest significance for the capitalist world – that the possibility of eroding the gulf between art and society, long ago abandoned by the historical avant-garde, has been realised to a large extent in Cuba. And, while it is important not to idealise these gains, Cuba can legitimately boast one of the most culturally (and linguistically) literate populations in the world.

### Reprise

In considering the ways in which culture was embraced in revolutionary Cuba, this paper provides some insight into the kinds of subjectivities that can be encouraged if capitalist globalisation and its underlying ideological and cultural logic are rejected. In Cuba after 1959, proletarian humanism was embraced by key revolutionary figures even before Marxism was officially adopted by the leadership. Predicated on emancipation from centuries of colonial and neocolonial occupation, this relied upon the stimulation of individual and social consciousness in ways that implicated all branches of the arts. The uniquely Cuban reconciliation of emancipation, consciousness and culture became distilled in the concept of the new Cuban man, elaborated by Che Guevara, which foregrounded the individual moral impetus as a necessary precursor to the creation of new social relations. Through their pedagogical work and the creation of artworks that indirectly communicated the realities of society-in-progress, artists and writers felt compelled to participate in the creation of new revolutionary subjects throughout society (themselves included).

In considering the ways in which culture was re-imagined in Cuba in the 1960s and 1970s, we find artistic freedom (which was perceived by those giving thought to the matter to have been lost in the capitalist world, through the subordination of art to

mercantile relations) being reinstated through the decoupling of art from the market economy. At the same time, the revolutionary government imbued art with social value, and its creators began to enjoy enhanced social prestige. We have also seen that, largely through the efforts of the CNC, significant progress was made in eroding the gap between professional creators and the rest of the population as part of a broader process of intellectual democratisation. Artists and writers embedded themselves within society, addressing their newly literate audiences. And, as the emancipatory connotations of Marxian thought were embraced, the people of Cuba were provided with the tools to increased acculturation as a route to happiness and a prelude to the country's desired emergence from underdevelopment.

The struggle that took place in the 1960s and beyond has ensured that culture forms one of the three cornerstones of the Revolution, together with education and health. In 1975, in recognition of the need to adequately reward creators for the fruits of their labours, the PCC re-established intellectual property rights. Significantly, the legislation governing this move prescribed that ownership alone would pass to the purchaser of any artwork, with the author retaining copyright (Ministry of Culture 1982). This contradicts the standard practice of the capitalist world, which has historically deprived artists of rights to their work after its sale. Consistent with the democratising aims of revolutionary cultural policy, the reinstatement of intellectual property rights was made subordinate to the social need for disseminating cultural works as widely as possible (CNC 1970). And, while the simultaneous reintroduction of an art market in Cuba starkly illustrates the inequities that quickly result from such a system, the conception of art as a form of social production, and of the artist as an integral member of society, endures.

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