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The social value of culture: learning from revolutionary Cuba

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The social value of culture: learning from revolutionary Cuba

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As the tide turns against econometric calculations of cultural value, scope exists for careful reconsideration of the social value of culture. In Cuba after 1959, culture was placed at the heart of a society undergoing radical transformation. This article examines the socially orientated initiatives to which this revalidation gave rise. It shows that substantial changes were wrought in professional circles as art was acknowledged as a form of social production and remunerated accordingly. It also outlines the sustained efforts that were made to diminish the gap between creative intellectuals and the rest of society, by encouraging widespread appreciation of, and participation in, creative activity. This comprehensive programme was underscored by ideas around democratisation and emancipation that remain vital to contemporary discussions.

Keywords: culture; value; Cuba

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Introduction

In July 2012, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) – the main agency for funding academic research in the arts and humanities in the UK – announced the inception of a project predicated on the recognition that the economic impact of culture 'may in recent years have become too dominant in the discussion of cultural value'.[1] As an antidote, the AHRC's Cultural Value Project set out to enhance understanding of the value of culture to individuals and society,[2] which prompts an analysis of historical and international precedents.

The triumph of the Cuban Revolution on 1 January 1959 implied that the social role of culture would be valorised, a sense that became heightened when socialism was explicitly adopted in April 1961 (Pogolotti 2006). This article seeks to interrogate two strands of the cultural policy that was developed in Cuba during the 1960s, underwritten by a conception of culture as part of a shared patrimony, with art framed as a form of social production. This is not intended as an exhaustive account of the cultural policy of that era,[3] nor is any attempt made to convey a sense of the creative praxis that emerged as a consequence of policy.[4] Instead, by offering a comment on the rationale behind, and the realisation of, two socially inflected elements of policy, this article intends to illuminate understandings of the value of culture to individuals and society that can inform us in our present deliberations. After a brief consideration of the ideology underlying Cuban approaches to culture, two discrete sections, each with their own chronology, will explore the implications of policy upon professional life and society as a whole.

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Culture as a means of enhancing spiritual growth

Previous attempts to distinguish the Cuban ideological variant from that developed in the Soviet Union have had recourse to the notion of 'Martían Marxism', which one of the leading *comandantes*, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara de la Serna, is credited with having introduced into the constitution (Kronenberg 2011). This implies a Marxism tempered by the insistence of the nineteenth century Cuban poet and revolutionary, José Martí, on resistance to US imperialism being mounted across Latin America. Yet, while the ideas of Martí indisputably influenced the broader ideology of the Cuban Revolution from the outset and 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, documents pertaining to post-revolutionary cultural policy refer not to Martían Marxism but to Marxist humanism.

Central to any consideration of Marxist humanism is the revolutionary objective of total human emancipation, elaborated by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* of 1846. When detailing 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 to conclude that class society made the idea of a universal culture impossible. By contrast, Ponce proposed that culture could be understood as a form of social consciousness that encompassed individual consciousness, which could form the basis of a proletarian form of humanism (Troise 1969).

The Spanish-born Mexican Marxist aesthetician, Adolfo Sánchez Vásquez (whose lectures would prove useful to Cuban intellectuals in the 1960s), broached the logical gap between Marxist humanism and cultural production to argue 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' (Sánchez Vásquez 1965, p. 10). In this formulation, art was deemed to have a function in both exposing the failings of hierarchical society and helping to repair them.

Considering the instrumentalisation of culture to the betterment of society, Fidel Castro would elaborate, with ample historical justification, '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, 'Our duty is to see that the whole is at the service of the kind of man we wish to create. [...] I believe that 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' (Lockwood 1967, p. 111). Central to this assertion is the idea that the Revolution would bring about positive changes in the evolution of humanity, and that contact with the arts would help pave the way for this transformation. In emphasising the inherent properties of artworks, Fidel successfully exempted them from the didactic aims that were being enforced in orthodox Marxist circles. At the same time, he veered close to a Kantian understanding of artistic enjoyment and the contribution this experience could make to physical and mental well-being, the idealistic roots of which served to further distance him from orthodox materialism. But it is important to note here that, while the pleasure attributed to aesthetic encounters would become closely linked to individualism under bourgeois humanist regimes, reaching its zenith in the

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Romantic era, in post-revolutionary Cuba, the enjoyment of art was made available to all as part of the collective process of reshaping individual and social consciousness.

Che Guevara – whose reconciliation of theory and practice led him to be regarded as exemplary – was knowledgeable about matters of art and culture to the point of preoccupation. His thinking in this area was informed by, amongst other things, Ernst Fischer's book, *The Necessity of Art* – first published in the same year as the triumph of the Revolution – which speculated on art as a social experience (Fischer 1963 [1959]). On the basis of such ideas, Cubans would be encouraged to achieve full, un-alienated consciousness through holistic participation in society and culture. During a speech in June 1961, which set the parameters of cultural policy for the following decade, Fidel emphasised:

> […] 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. (Castro Ruz 1961, p. 19)

As explored in greater detail 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. But this did not mean that popular enjoyment of art should be confined to mediocre forms, and the President of the Republic, Dr Osvaldo Dorticós Torrado, would consistently argue that artists and writers had a duty to elevate the cultural level of society by taking artistic and literary weapons of the highest quality to the people (UNEAC 1961).

In this regard, a second highly instructive point to be taken from *The German Ideology* is Marx and Engels's 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, it is envisaged that the latent creativity of all the people should be encouraged, giving free rein to creative excellence.

In the wake of the Russian Revolution, Antonio Gramsci elaborated an anti-elitist conception of culture, proposing that, as everyone is capable of engaging in intellectual labour, the category of 'intellectual' does not rely on some intrinsic property of mental activity. In this schema, 'The traditional and vulgarised type of the intellectual is given by the man of letters, the philosopher, the artist' (Gramsci 1949, p. 9), whereas in fact 'Every social group, coming into existence […] creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields' (Ibid., p. 5). It is commonly presumed that this refers to a clear-cut division between two categories of intellectual – traditional and organic respectively – based on their ethos and class of origin. However, Gramsci's thinking in this area may be regarded as an attempt to expose the selective processes through which traditional intellectuals are favoured within a class society at the expense of the latent mental labour present at all levels of society. From this, the revolutionary idea emerges that the intellectual capacity of the huge breadth of organic intellectuals needs to be encouraged. As we shall see, this precedent for

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democratising culture would find easy accommodation with Cuban aims. And, while Cuban conceptions of the proletariat would tend towards the peasantry, rather than the industrial working class, it was 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.

At the same time, while capitalism has consistently been perceived to alienate artistic creation from both its producers and the society in which it is made – thereby diminishing its possible contribution to the betterment of humanity and the achievement of social justice – the Cuban Government continues to argue that socialism recognises the real value of art and literature, giving freedom and material stability to artists while revindicating a social role for culture in ways that will be considered here.

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Art as a form of social production

While a number of artists, writers and thinkers maintained some kind of praxis under the pre-revolutionary regime of General Fulgencio Batista, this was carried out in an often samizdat fashion that 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 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' (CPC 1961, p. 4).

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. In January 1961, a National Council of Culture (CNC) was established as the central organisation responsible for interpreting and implementing the cultural policy of the revolutionary government. At the First National Congress of Writers and Artists in August 1961, the CNC Director of Culture, Vincentina Antuña, alluded to numerous grants being awarded to young artists and writers. At the same event, the poet, Roberto Fernández Retamar, read out the founding statutes of the National Cuban Union of Writers and Artists (UNEAC) and announced the creation of a Literary and Artistic Fund under the new union. Cautioning that this fund should not be envisaged as a total solution to the material problems facing artists and writers, he articulated the hope that intellectual work would shortly be considered akin to manual work, making it worthy of remuneration, which, in turn, would bring about a commitment to the profession of arts and letters (UNEAC 1961).

According to a CNC publication, 1969 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), and the Cuban writer, Ambrosio Fornet, asserts 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' (Fornet 2004, p. 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' (Sarusky and Mosquera 1979, p. 40). In return, many artists repaid the state through their work as teachers within the national 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.

In 1961, the process of guaranteeing artists and writers a viable income brought about reorganisation of the Copyrights Institute, which would eventually see a decision being taken to revise copyright laws. Prior to the Revolution, laws governing intellectual property – drawn up on 10 January 1879 and amended in the 1930s – had covered scientific, literary, artistic, dramatic and musical works. On 29 April 1967, while inaugurating projects by female scholarship students at Guane, in Pinar del Rio province, Fidel contemplated the private property claims encompassing intellectual work that had historically prevented the people from accessing useful information. Considering that the country's cultural development could be accelerated by reprinting works from around the world – from North American technical manuals to works of universal literature – he proclaimed the abolition of copyright. At the same time, he renounced Cuba's right to any intellectual property accrued within its borders, on the understanding that provision would be made for those who relied for their survival on royalties from creative work (Castro Ruz 1967). In October of the same year, this theme was taken up at the preparatory seminar for the Cultural Congress of Havana, which would be staged in January 1968. Convinced of the national and international significance of this stance, the artists and writers present at the seminar willingly relinquished the commercial rights to their work, in return for their recognition within society and the value inherent in the creative act (Llanusa and Dorticós 1967; Sánchez Vázquez 1970). Accordingly, a resolution was issued on the subject of artists' rights, signalling Cuba's intention to elevate its cultural condition by accessing the world's knowledge (Pogolotti 2010).

At a stroke, the floodgates were open for the liberal reproduction of classic works of literature, sociology, anthropology and economy, freely disseminated around the island in Spanish-language editions of multiple thousands. At the same time, the renunciation of copyright on Cuban works reinforced the material reliance of writers upon the state. It has been observed, 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. (Casal 1971, p. 457)

In April 1971, the First National Congress of Education and Culture had its original educational remit extended in a bid to foreclose the international dimension of a prolonged cultural crisis.[5] While the victory of orthodox forces in the wake of the congress would disadvantage Marxist–humanist approaches for the remainder of the decade, the gathering of 1800 delegates in Havana provided the opportunity to reiterate that

> The Revolution frees art and literature from the inflexible mechanisms of supply and demand that rule over bourgeois society. Art and literature cease to be merchandise, and all possibilities will be offered for aesthetic expression and experimentation in its most diverse manifestations. (Instituto Cubano del Libro 1971, n.p.)

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And, while decisions about the receipt of support would be politicised in the wake of the congress, support did not, in itself, imply the imposition of any particular criteria.

The dissociation of artists from the market economy is consistent across internal and external documents. At the First Congress of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) in 1975, reference was made to the system of intellectual and artistic remuneration in place that had enabled the Revolution to eradicate the conditions of penury and humiliation in which art had been maintained (PCC 1976). This sentiment was repeated four years later, in a report to UNESCO which described Cuba as the only country in Latin America to accept art as a form of social production (Sarusky and Mosquera 1979).

Conceiving art as a form of social production 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, the politicised intellectuals of the era came to regard their intervention in public affairs as not only a possibility but also an obligation. 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 infinite happiness their work produced (UNEAC 1961).

As early as November 1963, the Cuban film-maker, Julio García Espinosa, added some provisos to this debate, advising that the concept of productivity in art could not be applied mechanically, lest artists be judged for the quantity of works produced in a given period, which would fail to take account of less productive artists or to recognise the quality of creative work. The quantitative path, he warned, could easily lead to opportunism and mediocrity rather than the increased spiritual wealth through which the Revolution sought to eradicate exploitation. Similarly, he feared that productivity might come to be measured in terms of the popularity of artworks, which would fail to recognise the need for experimental work that might not find public favour (García Espinosa 1963).

In 1975, in recognition of the need to adequately reward creators for the fruits of their labours, the PCC re-established intellectual property rights (PCC 1976). Accordingly, Law 14, ratified at the National Assembly of Popular Power in 1977, made provision for the moral recognition and juridical protection of copyright on the basis that this would stimulate the development of artistic, literary and scientific creation; it also detailed the remuneration of intellectual work according to guidelines drawn up by a newly formed Ministry of Culture in dialogue with the social agencies representing cultural producers (Ministerio de Cultura 1982).

Significantly, Law 14 prescribed that, following the sale of any work of art, ownership alone would pass to the purchaser, with the author retaining copyright. This contradicts the standard practice of the capitalist world, particularly the USA (with the exception of California), which has historically deprived artists of rights to their work after its sale. In a bid to overcome this in 1971, the art agent, Seth Siegelaub, and the New York City lawyer, Robert Projansky, drew up the Artist's Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement, a

> model contract, reserving certain rights to the artists, such as entitlement to fifteen per cent of subsequent sales, and the right to borrow the work for exhibitions at certain intervals and to veto loans to exhibitions in which the artist did not want it to be shown. (Grasskamp 2004, p. 56)

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In much the same way, the nineteenth century French concept of *droit de suite* gives artists rights over their work as it passes through the hands of successive owners. On 27 September 2001, the European Union attempted to have directive 2001/84/EC – giving artists continued rights over their work in the event of its resale – accepted across the union, but this legislation remains controversial in the UK.

Consistent with the democratising aims of post-revolutionary cultural policy, the reinstatement of intellectual property rights in Cuba was made subordinate to the broader social need for disseminating cultural works as widely as possible (CNC 1970). This means that, where any cultural work is considered necessary for scientific, technical or educational development, a licence can be granted for its reproduction and nationwide distribution, freely and without acrimony over money. Extracts of cultural products may be used without the consent of the author, either with or without remuneration, providing that the author is recognised as the originator of the work. And, while the recent 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.

In summary, then, the recognition of art as a form of social production in post-revolutionary Cuba, with the happiness of man as its ultimate goal, secured for artists both an esteemed place within society and an income that left them free to concentrate on their high-quality productions. In response, creative intellectuals have consistently involved themselves in all aspects of social life. This prompts us to give careful attention to the role of creative intellectuals within our societies, particularly in relation to the ways in which their work is valued within a market economy. 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 as a whole.

The reconciliation of art and society

Even before socialism had officially been adopted by the revolutionary government, a socially consequential role for art had been firmly embraced. In November 1960, the country's artists and writers issued a manifesto aligning them with the Revolution and its people. In August 1961, creative practitioners came together again, at the First National Congress of Writers and Artists, and took as one of their discussion topics 'Mutual reconciliation between writers, artists and the people' (UNEAC 1961, p. 10). Later, the first formal interpretation of the government's position on culture would build upon the conclusions of the 1961 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.).

Considering the specific ways in which culture was conceived in Cuba, we find that, during the insurrectionary years, it remained synonymous with education. The first manifesto issued by Fidel's 26 July Movement, while the Castro brothers were exiled in Mexico, points 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' (Castro Ruz 1955). Having coordinated a guerrilla campaign in the densely forested

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terrain of the Sierra Maestra mountains for more than two years, the triumphant revolutionaries turned their attention to ironing out the inequalities that persisted in rural areas. The broader rationale for this is to be found in Lenin's assertion that

> in order to abolish classes completely, it is not enough to overthrow the exploiters, the landlords and capitalists, not enough to abolish *their* rights of ownership of the means of production, it is necessary to abolish the distinction between town and country, as well as the distinction between manual workers and brain workers. (Lenin 1909, p. 23)

Within two weeks of Batista's exodus, Che Guevara set up a school in the fortress and former prison at La Cabaña, and Fidel asserts that Che 'wanted his first action as a military commander to be putting in place his literacy programme and teaching all combatants' (Castro Ruz 2006, p. 202). On the understanding that writing and related activities would be a first step in reducing inequality, an ambitious strategy was launched. On 22 September 1960, Fidel announced at the United Nations General Assembly that the Revolution would eradicate illiteracy within a year. During 1961, which became known as Year of Education, a census was conducted which, by the end of August, had identified 985,000 illiterates (Rafael Rodríguez 1978). The universities were closed, and a hundred thousand young people, armed with politicised teaching manuals, oil lamps and oversized pencils, were sent out into the countryside to teach the peasant population to read. A specially designed flag was hoisted in villages to attest to the eradication of illiteracy, which, within one year, dropped to just 3.7% (Camnitzer 1994).

In a pamphlet published by UNESCO at the end of the 1970s, it was claimed that the Revolution kept its promise in 'an extraordinary feat on the part of the Cuban people who, in but one year, succeeded in eradicating an evil considered as insuperable in more developed countries' (Sarusky and Mosquera 1979, p. 13). And, while it may be argued that only basic literacy was mastered and just as easily forgotten, with some refusing to participate in this costly campaign, at local and international levels the literacy campaign came to define the energy and experimentalism of the Revolution, massively transforming the peasantry and providing a revolutionary role for teenagers who had been too young to participate in the armed struggle (Gott 2004).

If, as seems clear, Gramsci's intention was to encourage a wholesale reappraisal of the mechanisms through which intellectual opportunity is disseminated, his evocations were enthusiastically taken up in Cuba, with education being made available to all strata of society at the same time as attempts were made to erode those strata. The momentum of the literacy campaign was continued into education more broadly, and grants were offered to students wishing to train as teachers. Initially prioritising those who had worked as *brigadistas alfabetizadores*, 40,800 grants were awarded; by the first semester of 1961, this had risen to 50,000; by 1973, to 458,000 and, by the start of courses in 1974–1975, to 542,000 (Ministerio de Educación 1975). A school for student teachers was set up at Minas del Frio in the Sierra Maestra, training young people from every province who would disseminate their skills throughout the mountainous region around the school and beyond (Lockwood 1967).

The programme for training new teachers inevitably stimulated an increase in the number of children entering primary education, with 717,000 alumni in 1958–1959 multiplying to eight million entrants in 1967–1968. The same picture is seen at

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secondary and tertiary levels, along with the intention of increasing not only the quantity but also the quality of educational opportunity for revolutionary students (Llanusa and Dorticós 1967). Such a pronounced commitment to education found its way into the balance sheets of the revolutionary government, and so, whereas Batista had invested 79.4 MMP (million pesos) in education in 1957–1958, this had jumped to 260.4 MMP by 1965 and to 741.5 MMP by 1974 (Ministerio de Educación 1975). At the same time, the school curriculum was changed to reflect the aims of the new society, with individualism being discouraged in favour of cooperation (Lockwood 1967).

While raised educational levels played a part in uniting rural and urban populations, they also signalled the emergence of an audience capable of enjoying cultural production and of playing an active part in the creation of artistic and literary works. The 1971 congress would attest, in relation to mass education, that

> the literacy campaign, the nationalisation of teaching and the means of mass communication, the plans for grants and the creation of cultural institutions were essential premises of this transformation. From this followed in the people the eagerness for books, theatrical works, films, art. (Santana 1977, n.p.)

In this way, burgeoning literacy may be regarded as the foundation stone of Cuban cultural policy, priming the population for informed participation. Supplanting purely educational understandings, culture came to be defined both as ‘all the creation of a human community’ and as ‘literature, the arts and thinking’, with a tendency to prioritise the latter over the former (Fernández Retamar 1966, p. 266).

Early in the life of the CNC, its provincial outpost published an unassuming four-page pamphlet entitled *Culture for the People*. Extracted from a manual of Marxism–Leninism issued the previous year, it laid the foundations for mass participation in culture, beginning: ‘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’ (CPC 1961, p. 1). Consistent with Gramsci’s conception of organic intellectuals and the Cuban approach to education and culture more broadly, the underlying rationale for this was that ‘Thousands and thousands of men of talent are lost in the capitalist world, unable to find a path through the privations and indifference of society’ (Ibid., p. 2). By contrast, under socialism, it was envisaged 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. (Sarusky and Mosquera 1979, p. 21)

By the end of 1962, the CNC’s interpretation of government policy had cohered into a 10-point Preliminary Plan, which aimed, amongst other things:

- To unreservedly acknowledge the talent and creative capacity of Cubans, offering the opportunities necessary to end devaluation of their production.
- To form, through art schools and seminaries, a new intelligentsia arising from the worker-farmer masses.
- To promote art and literature consonant with the historical moment in which Cuba exists, through educative practice promoting a greater degree of

intimate contact between the creators and the people, through coexistence in farms and factories, enabling better reflection through creative work.
- To promote cultural improvement in the great majority of people, intensively developing activities aimed at increasing interest in good art and reading books of literary and scientific value.
- To erase the inequalities between the cultural life of the capital and the rest of the island, promoting cultural activities in the rural and urban areas of the provinces (CNC 1963, n.p.).

At the CNC's First National Congress of Culture, held in Havana in December 1962, each province outlined its programme of work in the cultural field. In his introduction to the congress, Dorticós indicated that one of the fundamental tasks of the Revolution was to create a socialist culture based on the principles of Marxist humanism – a culture for the people. The congress unanimously approved the plans that had been drawn up by the CNC, including the concrete tasks relating to education and culture.

Within this, detailed consideration was given to the ways in which the 'Mutual reconciliation between writers, artists and the people', outlined by artists and writers in August 1961, would be achieved, with specific steps being determined for raising the cultural level of the population. Looking at the Preliminary Plan in more depth, we find a two-pronged strategy for tackling the gap that had been identified between the art and the people. This proposed that, in order to overcome the unequal access to culture that had been inherited from the previous regime, dissemination of the most representative artistic and literary expressions of each epoch and direct participation in cultural production needed to be encouraged (CNC 1963).

With regard to cultural appreciation, the CNC implemented a programme of activities, and, in the first half of 1963, almost half the population had visited a concert, theatrical performance, museum, exhibition or similar. Like the literacy activists before them, *brigadistas* took an appreciation of art into the countryside, giving talks, organising conferences and explaining works of theatre, dance and music to those living in rural areas. UNESCO became a key partner in these educational endeavours, setting up a National Commission on Cuba and making slides, art albums and other materials available for the purposes of developing art education in adults and young people (Ministerio de Industria 1966). At the same time, a system of mobile cinemas – 112 pulled by lorry, 22 drawn by animals and two carried by boat around the coast – took films to the furthest reaches of the island.

In considering the 1960s, Fornet describes how

> Hundreds of thousands of people were able to read a book for the first time […] Hundreds of thousands of adolescents attended a painting exhibition for the first time, listened to a recording of symphony music or were present at a performance of ballet or traditional dance. (2004, p. 10)

And, while there are those who contend that art audiences remained more sophisticated in urban areas (Camnitzer 1994), the current president of the writers' and artists' union, Graziella Pogolotti, argues that 'The end result is that there has undoubtedly been an extension of the public for culture, and a great effort has been made to disrupt the monopoly of the City of Havana' (2010, n.p.).

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Once increased appreciation of the arts had been stimulated, Fidel invoked the 'conversion of the people from spectators into creators' (Castro 1961, p. 32). Gramsci had earlier prophesied that 'Bourgeois careerism will be shattered and there will be a poetry, a novel, a theatre, a moral code, a language, a painting and a music' of revolution (Gramsci 1921, p. 50). Without precisely describing these new art forms, he understood that their emergence would entail destroying

> spiritual hierarchies, prejudices, idols and ossified traditions […] not being afraid of innovations and audacities, not being afraid of monsters, not believing that the world will collapse if a worker makes grammatical mistakes, if a poem limps, if a picture resembles a hoarding or if young men sneer at academic and feeble-minded senility. (Ibid., p. 51)

In 1961, building on Che's earlier initiative to educate the peasants of the Rebel Army, the National Institute of Agrarian Reform under his direction created a School for Art Instructors. Following an extensive series of discussions and seminars, various skills deficits were identified and plans systematised, under the CNC, in a School for Cultural Activists – a boarding establishment at which training costs were covered and students were paid wages for the duration of their courses (Otero 1972). This formed the basis of a major initiative to train thousands of art instructors, with a key distinction being that 'An instructor is not formed to be an artist but to detect, orientate, raise awareness of and stimulate activity in diverse sectors of the population' (CNC 1970).

While something of a precedent for this programme exists – in the Proletkult group's instigation of proletarian creative writing studios in the Soviet Union; in the coercive, Soviet-inspired Movement for Communication between City and Countryside, initiated in Poland in 1948; and in the rural mobilisation of artists and writers as part of the Great Leap Forward in China from 1958 – the CNC claimed no experience on which to draw for the selection of alumni and the planning of studies. Thousands of instructors were initially selected from people's farms and popular zones to study in the capital, thereafter returning to their places of origin to disseminate the skills they had learnt.

Teacher training courses would be open to entrants aged between 15 and 25, pending completion of the fourth grade of primary instruction. Instructors were trained in theatre, popular music, modern dance and the plastic arts, underwritten by general technical knowledge and a study of folklore, with cross-disciplinarity being encouraged. Professional practitioners were implicated in the process of training art instructors, and Fernández Retamar would insist that instructors could only be trained, directly or indirectly, by those who had already assumed the criteria and attitude of art – that is, by artists (Fernández Retamar 1962). The definition of teachers would come to include both professional teachers and the instructors of amateur artists, or *aficionados*, and fluidity existed between the two types of teacher.

By 1963, 1500 people had registered as instructors and those with a vocation for teaching remained in the school. By 1975, 47 schools were providing artistic education courses, with 5000 Cubans studying to become instructors (PCC 1976). By the end of the decade, the aforementioned UNESCO report refers 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' (Sarusky and Mosquera 1979).

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The CNC's Preliminary Plan refers to the aim of training graduates capable of orientating groups of *aficionados* throughout the nation. Mediated by the CNC and relevant social organisations, the instructors succeeded in stimulating social and intellectual participation and 'allowing the people to channel in large part their artistic vocations and to develop their aesthetic perceptions' (CNC 1963). In the early years, the *aficionado* programme was based in student and work centres, farms, cooperatives and peasant organisations, promoted by the corresponding mass organisations and unions. Over the next decade, many vocational art centres were opened, which played an important part in diffusing cultural products and harnessing the artistic talents of the people. Among 63 plastic art centres, various workshops existed in which *aficionados* received (gratis) the training necessary to make their own artworks. These centres were the font of copious production, and exhibitions of work initiated there toured around the island. In 1975, Fidel reprised the work of the CNC in this area, commenting on the massive expansion from 1164 *aficionado* groups in 1964 to more than 18,000 groups realising 120,000 creative projects a decade later (PCC 1976), and 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).

Having achieved mass participation, attention was turned to considerations of quality. While qualitative measures met with varying degrees of success, provision was maintained for the transition of the most gifted amateurs into professional ranks. However, the consistent, and commendable, insistence of the revolutionary government on professional quality meant that sufficiently high standards of creative production were difficult to attain. There is parity here with the literacy campaign, which achieved literacy throughout the island, albeit at a basic level. Extending the literary metaphor into the plastic arts, reading is to the passive reception of art what writing and speaking are to its active production. As anyone will know who has learnt a foreign language in adult life, it is easier to read and listen than it is to gain the confidence to speak, let alone to construct eloquent prose.

The extent to which professional artists, trained before the Revolution, acted as an impediment to those organic intellectuals arising afterwards remains a point of contention. It is possible that there was not enough willingness on the part of intellectuals either to disseminate their creative skills or to relinquish their territory. It seems more likely, however, that the deployment of instructors – as intermediaries between professional and amateur artists – did not create a direct enough relationship for all the ingredients necessary for high-quality artistic activity to be transmitted with ease. In evaluating the ongoing significance of the *aficionados* programme, however, it is important to remember that the aim was never that of turning a whole society into professional artists; rather, in stimulating the population to participate in creative activity, the revolutionary government sought to provide access to an un-alienated mode of thought that could provide the foundations of a better society.

The attempts made to diminish the gap between art and society in Cuba has far-reaching consequences. Significantly, the late eighteenth century shift to a market economy in the wider world coincided with the inception of aesthetic theory, which saw Kant positing aesthetics as a realm of enquiry distinct from both practical reason (moral judgement) and understanding (scientific knowledge), to form a necessary but problematic bridge between the two (Kant 1790). Terry Eagleton has convincingly argued that the imposition of theory onto a potentially liberating, sensual experience formed part of a deliberate attempt to engender the social cohesion

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necessary to capitalist societies grounded in consensus and economic individualism (Eagleton 1990).

As an antidote to the aloofness of Kantian aesthetics, the Italian art critic, Mario de Micheli – whose work on the European artistic vanguards of the twentieth century would be published in Cuba in the 1960s – cites Hegel's invocation that artistic work should be created with the people in mind (De Micheli 1967). 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 considering early twentieth century Western Europe, the German literary critic, Peter Bürger, 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 (Bürger 1974). For Bürger, 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 USA 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 (long ago dropped by the historical avant-garde), the Cuban experiment has realised itself in the most ambitious reconciliation of art and society to have taken place to date.

A shared commitment to change in the post-revolutionary period would establish a necessary link between political and artistic vanguards (Pogolotti 2006). The respected Uruguayan novelist, poet and journalist, Mario Benedetti, who had been visiting Cuba since 1966, observed that, much quicker than in European socialist countries, the political and aesthetic vanguards reached a state in which they could fertilise one another (Benedetti 1969), and Fornet 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' (Fornet 2007, pp. 382–383).

Conclusions

One of the most striking elements of post-revolutionary Cuban cultural policy is the massive effort that was made to unleash the latent creative potential of an entire populace. Inspired by Che Guevara and implemented by the National Council of Culture, the *aficionados* programme continues to encourage hundreds of thousands of Cubans to engage not only in the passive reception of art but also its active production. This has achieved considerable success in demystifying the production of art and in giving rise to a highly culturally literate population.

Herein lies the area of post-revolutionary cultural policy with the most consequence 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. Any contemporary programme seeking to investigate the social value of culture would do well to consider the ways in which cultural

participation can be democratised. More than half a century after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, it seems clear that further research is needed into the emancipatory connotations of aesthetic engagement.

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Notes

1. This is taken from an advertisement for a postdoctoral researcher to work on the Cultural Value Project that appeared on the website topcareers.jobs until 18 August 2012 [Accessed 1 August 2012].
2. For the announcement of the AHRC's Cultural Value Project, see: http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/News/Pages/Project-to-understand-the-value-of-arts-and-culture.aspx [Accessed 17 September 2012].
3. This is dealt with by the author in a book-length study entitled *To Defend the Revolution is to Defend Culture: The Cultural Policy of the Cuban Revolution*.
4. For a brief introduction to some of the early visual forms of the Cuban Revolution, see David Craven, 'The visual arts since the Cuban revolution', *Third Text*, 6, 20, 1992, pp. 77–102. For a consideration of the various personalities and polemics that emerged around aesthetics in the 1960s, see 'The Aesthetics of Socialism: Cultural Polemics in 1960s Cuba' by the present author.
5. This controversy, centred on the first-generation poet, Heberto Padilla, has been discussed at length elsewhere.

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