

## CULTURAL POLICY, PARTICIPATION AND THE GATEKEEPER STATE IN CUBA

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This paper is part of a project on the political participation of cultural actors under authoritarian regimes, looking at them from both ends: the policies and these actors' typical behaviour and strategies to cope with this environment. More specifically, it examines the recent evolution of cultural policy in Cuba, and proposes to apply the concept of "gatekeeper state" (Cooper, 2002; Corrales, 2004) to the "cultural field" (Bourdieu, 1992). Furthermore, it critically reassesses a common interpretation of the "dispositions" of artists and writers in the cultural field. My hypothesis is that liberalization in the cultural field (or in any policy field for that matter) serves the state's best interests. I propose (Grenier, 2012) that artists and writers typically seek recognition and participation, not only (or even primarily) more "space" and autonomy within the cultural field. The logic of relations between the state and cultural actors is one of power (policing and self-policing) but also one of mutual accommodation.

In an insightful article on economic reforms and the state in Cuba from 1989 to 2002, political scientist Javier Corrales (2004) argues that "behind the pretense of market reforms, the Cuban government ended up magnifying the power of the state to decide who can benefit from market activities and by how much" (Corrales, 2004: 46). It deployed a system of "formal and informal controls," alternatively using tactics of "openness and rigidity" to achieve its goals (Corrales, 2004: 50–51, quoting Aguirre, 2002).

This framework is useful as a point of departure to analyze the evolution of cultural policy in Cuba.

However, the recent opening in the cultural field can better be understood as part of a time honoured policy of "opening and closing" that has been a distinctive feature of Cuba's mode of governance. The cultural and economic fields represent the policy areas where this back and forth is most visible.

The scholarly literature on the public role of artists and writers suggests that they are hard-wired to value freedom: e.g., freedom *from* constraints and freedom *to* express their unique individuality (Steiner, 1998). Artists and writers tend to be *critical* of dominant values and institutions. Similarly, the literature on cultural policy in Cuba is almost unanimous in concluding that Cuban artists and writers continuously strive to acquire more "space" for expression, foiling bureaucratic control and censorship with subtle artistic and discursive strategies (Collmann, 1999; Johnson, 2003; Howe, 2004; Miller, 2005; Fernandes, 2006; Geoffray, 2008). In doing so, they manage to deliver critical perspectives on politics and society, something other actors simply can't do. Thus, Cuban writers and artists end up accepting the mission that Latin American (though not Cuban) intellectuals chose for themselves during the 1960s: they are the voice of the voiceless, the critical conscience of society (Fuentes, 1969; Navarro, 2002; Mosquera, 1999).

In probably the most convincing analysis in this line of argument, sociologist Sujantha Fernandes writes: "with formal political activities prohibited, critical debate began to be relegated to the sphere of arts and culture, where, perhaps surprisingly, the state tolerat-

ed greater diversity and freedom of cultural expression” (Fernandes, 2006: 40). She talks about a semi-autonomous “artistic public sphere,” in which privileged artists can “negotiate with the state” and make gains unavailable to other actors in civil society. Finally, I strongly agree with her contention that trends in the “artistic public sphere” reveal much about the polity as a whole. “After the late 1990s,” for her, “there were increasing attempts to use the arts as a way of reincorporating and reintegrating the Cuban people into a new hegemonic project” (Fernandes, 2006: 40). She finds that “negotiation with the state can amplify the scope of what is possible in cultural politics, but it also helps to delineate the boundaries of what is officially permissible” (Fernandes, 2006: 151).

This interpretation is valuable but it arguably misses an important disposition of artists and writers in Cuba and beyond: their desire to fit in, to be recognized and to participate. This is what is expected from them and from any public figure in a self-proclaimed revolutionary regime such as Cuba’s. As Hungarian intellectual Miklós Haraszti wrote: “The state artist recognizes that the only freedom within the socialist system is that of participation” (Haraszti, 1987: 150). Writer and cultural commissar Lisandro Otero told his colleagues, in his capacity as president of the organizing committee of the IV Congress of UNEAC in 1988, “el intelectual en una sociedad auténticamente revolucionaria tiene ante sí el deber de consentir” (Documentos, 1988:2). And to consent, they did, for a variety of reasons (enthusiasm during the 1960s, routine and risk aversion afterward). Cautious push and pull “within the revolution” is exactly what is expected from them. Be that

as it may, if one looks for an agent of change in Cuba, a voice for the voiceless, the evidence that writers and artists are that avant-garde is rather scant.

### WITHIN THE REVOLUTION, IT DEPENDS

To fine tune the analysis of participation and public expression under an authoritarian regime, I proposed to go back to the concept of “parameter,” which has been used in Cuba (*parametrage, parametración*) to discuss restrictions to public expression (Grenier, 2012). I propose to apply the concept to public expression and to activities, and I distinguish between two types of parameters (Grenier, 2013).

The primary parameters, which shield the meta-political (foundational) narrative of the Fidelista regime from any cross-examination. In Cuba the master narrative revolves around the notion that the revolution never ends, which something unique in world history. Furthermore, the Revolution is teleologically embodied in the persona (*persona* means individual but also mask) of Fidel Castro and now, by extension, Raúl. To publicly pass judgement on Fidel (and Raúl) is to criticize the Revolution and vice versa. The official narrative on the “blockade” is also untouchable. If in other communist countries the state is the administrative agency of the Communist party, in Cuba the state and the party are the administrative agencies of *la revolución de Fidel*.<sup>1</sup> Within the totalitarian paradigm, this emphasis on the *movement* rather than the *state* is closer to the Nazi model than to either the fascist or communist worldviews.<sup>2</sup>

The secondary parameters delimit political participation within the regime (*La Revolución, Communism, the state, etc*); i.e., what can be said and done, how, where and when.<sup>3</sup> To modify Fidel Castro’s most fa-

1. Looking at the political development in Central Europe during the 1950s and 1960s, Leonid Brezhnev explained on August 3, 1968, that “Each Communist party is free to apply the principles of Marxism-Leninism and socialism in its own country, but it is not free to deviate from these principles if it is to remain a Communist Party” (quoted in Judt, 422). Within the communist paradigm, everything is permissible, against it, nothing is. Or as Benito Mussolini said in a public speech on May 26, 1927, “All within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state.”

2. For Wolin, “Mussolini, who always emphasized the specificity of Italian traditions, stressed the preeminence of the state. This emphasis was foreign to the worldview of National Socialism, in which the state was often perceived as a bureaucratic impediment to the authenticity of the ‘movement.’” Wolin, 2006:183.

3. Primary and secondary parameters correspond broadly to what authors Baogang He and Mark E. Warren (2011) called “regime level” and “governance level.”

mous admonition in his epochal speech known as *Palabras a los intelectuales* (1961): Against the Revolution, nothing is possible; within the Revolution, it depends. Thus, within the revolution, it is generally (though not always) possible to publicly (1) deplore mistakes made in the past by fallen bureaucrats; (2) lament the poverty of criticism and debate on the island as a consequence of internal problems within the cultural field, not because of the Castro brothers and their policies; (3) constructively highlight problems in Cuba without discussing their political root causes. Government officials can make mistakes, and the population can help identifying those, as long as culprits are bureaucrats or micro-factions.<sup>4</sup> Fidel and Raúl can also admit mistakes and “rectify” them; *La Revolución* is adaptable, grows from its lapses and can never be wrong on the fundamentals. Last but not least, constructive criticism should always foster unity so it goes down better with praises of Fidel and *La Revolución*, denunciation of the US and Cuban dissidents, and comforting words on how things have already improved. In sum, some criticism is possible within secondary parameters, and criticism is a seed that can grow and have unforeseen implications. But at face value, “within the revolution,” no genuine criticism is possible in Cuba.

Made of both implicit and explicit rules, parameters are a constant source of uncertainty for individuals and groups, especially in the cultural sector because it concerns public expression. Crossing the line delineated by the secondary parameters can be a venial offence and the individual be redeemed, after spending some time in the purgatory. The list of *parametrados* artists and writers in Cuba who are now rehabilitated (even feted, like Arrufat, or empowered, like Barnet)

is rather long (Howe, 2004).<sup>5</sup> Infringing the primary parameters—essentially, by condemning Fidel or second-guessing his favorite totems (he is the revolution, the embargo is a genocidal blockade, Cuba should never negotiate with the US on lifting the embargo)—is unpardonable. The primary parameters are typically stable, even in time of changes. Only Fidel could have changed them, and perhaps so could Raúl. The secondary parameters are more elusive and complex. The distinction between primary and secondary parameters helps us to understand that change and continuity, openness and rigidity are not as opposites but rather, the yin and yang of monistic rule in Cuba.

### CHANGE: A LAMPEDUSIAN INTERPRETATION

A character in Lampedusa’s novel *The Leopard* famously proclaims: “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.” This witticism offers a key to unlock the rationale for top-down policy changes in Cuba. As Cuban intellectual Ambrosio Fornet wrote: “Few countries have changed as much as Cuba has since then [end of USSR] while remaining essentially the same” (Fornet, 1997: 3). The constitutional and economic changes adopted by Fidel and Raúl Castro following the collapse of the Soviet Union were unambiguously “Lampedusian” in nature.<sup>6</sup>

The new scholarship on authoritarian regimes takes a close look at practices and institutions where actors enjoy increasing level of autonomy, negotiating with the regime and pushing for change (Gandhi, 2010). This happens when the regime opens up and implements “reforms.” Such a regime would typically be called “hybrid,” “soft-authoritarian,” “competitive

4. Thus, after affirming that censorship no longer exists in Cuba, John Kirk adds: “This does not mean, unfortunately, that there are not still ‘hard-liners’ seeking to limit cultural expression, nor functionaries determined to protect their sinecure by criticizing any work they might consider the least bit unorthodox” (Kirk and Padura, 2001: xxiv).

5. What Antón Arrufat says about Virginio Piñera could apply, with some minor adjustments, to many other writers and artists, starting with himself: “Si estuvo marginado durante nueve años, no fue, como se ha afirmado en el extranjero, un perseguido. Siguió en su trabajo de traductor en el antiguo Instituto del Libro, en su apartamento, paseando por las calles... [...]. Fue rasgo permanente de su persona, desde que, en los primeros meses del triunfo se integró al proceso, hasta su muerte, al estar dispuesto a participar” (Arrufat, 1987:19).

6. Coincidentally, in 1992 *Juche* (Kim Il-sung’s own socialist-nationalist concoction) replaced Marxism-Leninism in the North Korean constitution.

authoritarian,” “electoral authoritarian,” “late socialist,” “post-totalitarian,” “semi-authoritarian,” or “semi-democratic.” The key policy area seems to be the electoral system, looking at the possible benefits and perils (for the regime) of opening its doors to opposition parties. For instance, the case of Cuba suggests that opening can take place in a policy area or “field” too (e.g., the economy, culture, politics), and not just in what Gandhi calls “nominally democratic institutions” such as the electoral system or the legislature.

Authoritarian regimes are typically monistic but they are not monolithic. For their own stability they need to deal effectively with “factions” (in Madison’s sense) of various kinds, including within the state apparatus itself.<sup>7</sup> This represents challenges but also opportunities, for it allows leaders to experiment with policies, to keep the various institutional groups guessing and competing for recognition. It provides them with a range of officially sanctioned policy alternatives. No faction or trend remains dominant forever and at the end, only the top leadership always wins.

Periods of so-called “liberalization” make possible to settle a score with individuals and groups that fell out of favour. Opening the cultural field (at least to some actors) defuses some tensions and can help to halt exodus of writers and artists. It allows them (and also social scientists) to highlight the kind of problems the government is professing to fix. Finally, a carefully calibrated policy of opening yields opportunities

for reconciliation with the government and with the past (Santí, 2011).

It is no accident if politics in self-proclaimed revolutionary countries like Cuba typically feature two main camps: the hard liners (derogatively: the Taliban or the Dinosaurs) and the reformers, often called “liberals” (though they rarely are). In the cultural field, this translates into an opposition between the “ideological” and the “cultural” tendencies (Fogel and Rosenthal, 1993: 412), or between the “dogmatic” and what Rafael Rojas once called the *intelectuales inquietos* (Rojas, 1997a: 132–33).

After several years (or decades!) of fairly erratic, partial and capricious swings between “opening” and “closing,” individuals and groups become risk averse and hesitate to fully occupy the “space” seemingly (and tentatively) available. This is a problem for the rulers. Thus, in his closing speech at the first National Conference of the Cuban Communist Party (February 2012), Raúl Castro condemned what he called the “false unanimity” in the media (which of course are completely controlled by his government), taunting people to “tell the truth” and to be more critical (Castro, 2012). Fidel and other top officials did the same repeatedly in the past.<sup>8</sup>

The challenge is to assess how much criticism is allowed by the Comandante. Here are some illustrations of how it plays out. Cuban social scientist and intellectual Esteban Morales Domínguez recently wrote on his (official) blog: “La televisión tampoco utiliza de manera suficiente el potencial de que dispone dentro de la intelectualidad, para debatir y esclare-

7. In Iran, according to Houchang E. Chehabi, “Khatami, the Ministry of Culture, which controls censorship and issue licenses for newspapers and journals, adopted more liberal policies, inaugurating a period of press freedom and diversity. But the Judiciary, headed by a conservative ally of the Leader, used its powers to close down newspapers and indict and jail reformist journalists and editors who had incurred the displeasure of conservatives. For every newspaper that was closed down, the Ministry of culture would issue a new license and the newspaper would appear under a new name” (Chehabi and Keshavarzian, 554). Recently the minister of culture, Ali Jan-nati, publicly criticized his own government’s censorship of the internet and social media (*New York Times*, 26 June 2014). Similarly, in the case of Cuba, Fogel and Rosenthal concluded that “Les connaisseurs n’en ont pas moins compris ce qui est en jeu, car le système du pouvoir, à Cuba, n’est pas une affaire de ligne, d’idéologie ou de stratégie, mais de luttes claniques” (Fogel and Rosenthal, 1993: 413).

8. For instance, in a speech to UNEAC members in 1988, the secretary of the Central Committee and director of the Department of Revolutionary Orientation of the CCP Carlos Aldana denounced the UNEAC’s “parálisis y [el] anquilosamiento,” decried the fact that until recently “la UNEAC virtualmente actuaba como un apéndice del Partido,” and the “tenaz marasmo a la mayoría de nuestra prensa diaria.” How to get out of all this? By fostering an intense debate, which according to Aldana was already taking place everywhere in the island, this originating “en los reiterados planteamientos críticos y tesis que el compañero Fidel ha venido desarrollando y en las transformaciones que se han derivado de ellos, cuya esencia es el perfeccionamiento de nuestro socialismo” (In *Documentos*, 8).

cer los temas de mayor interés de la población.” Then he adds: “Es necesario que la crítica abierta, como la ha proclamado Raúl Castro, deje de ser algo más que una orientación política y una consigna. Para pasar a convertirse en el modo de existir político.”<sup>9</sup> Also on his (official) blog, writer and film director Eduardo del Llano supports the idea of “una prensa opositora libre y legal,” only to add that it would be good for Raúl, who himself called for a more vigorous press. Del Llano takes the opportunity to maul independent journalists, pitching in for an old government favourite: the distinction between good and bad opposition. Another example: in an interview writer Senel Paz says: “Remember that Soviet and Eastern European socialism did not crumble or collapse because of the undeniable social and other achievements that were publicized, as ours were too, in marvelous positive images. It collapsed for reasons that were never discussed. There was an aspect of reality the expression of which was prohibited; there was no image or, rather, only a captive image amounting to the fallacy that such a reality didn’t exist because it couldn’t be expressed” (Paz, 1997:85–86). In other words, talking about problems gives a chance to solve them and prevent the regime’s collapse.

Indicators of “liberal” v. “orthodox” tendencies can be hard to pin down in regimes where the official ideology does not stand on its own, as it may seem to be the case. In fact, ideology is an adaptable resource in the hand of rulers. Many years ago, sociologist Jeffrey Goldfarb looked at the interplay between various politico-cultural tendencies in communist states and concluded that the line “between officially supported propagandistic expression and officially repressed dissident expression” cannot be drawn neatly. For him, “Public expression supported by the party and state

does not necessarily mirror party values, and public expression repressed by the state is not necessarily dissident. Official policies with direct influence on public expression do not simply have the one dimensional consequence of promoting supportive expression and repressing politically dissident expression” (Goldfarb, 1978: 921).<sup>10</sup> In Cuba, individual factors such as personal connection, international recognition and type of artistic activity play a more important role than ideology (all writers and artists basically work within the primary parameters) in influencing decision on what is to be allowed or not.

The Fidelista regime maintains two tendencies, playing one against the other,<sup>11</sup> or better still: it can reject them both and emerge as the uniting force and true source of revolutionary wisdom. Hence Alfredo Guevara examines the tendencies of “dogmatismo y liberalismo,” and comments that “ambas han pretendido siempre hablar en nombre de la revolución, introduciendo así sus puntos de vista antirrevolucionarios en un debate donde cada cual halla la justificación de su existencia en su contrario” (Guevara, 2003: 173). Similarly, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez once stated that “... aunque el liberalismo es peligroso y la complacencia inaceptable, más peligrosos todavía, en el terreno de la cultura y la ciencia, son la intolerancia y el dogmatismo” (Documentos, 7). The first minister of culture (1976–97) and former minister of education Armando Hart, talked about his opposition to “dogmáticos” and an equally deplorable cast of characters he calls the “librepensadores” (Hart, 1987: 3).

Last but not least, authoritarian regimes rarely open up all the way to fully liberalize or democratize (Mexico, Chile and South Africa being the exceptions). Communist regimes have never done that. As Tony Judt said about East European and Russian commu-

9. <http://www.estebanmoralesdominguez.blogspot.ca/>, August 2, 2012.

10. In North Korea, admittedly an extreme case of totalitarianism, one finds no real aesthetic or political difference between artists who are purged and those who are not according to Tatiana Gabroussenko. For her, “the degree of ideological dissent in the activity of the North Korean literary ‘soldiers’ was virtually zero. Close investigation of supposedly heretical texts whose authors were purged for alleged ideological transgressions provides no proof of any ideological defiance. North Korean literature appeared to be remarkably homogeneous in terms of ideological and Party loyalties, and all writers, including the victims of the political campaigns of the 1950s, eagerly responded to Party demands” (Gabroussenko: 168–9).

11. For Rafael Rojas, “las polémicas económicas y culturales de la década del 60 le fueron muy útiles a Fidel Castro y sus colaboradores después de la institucionalización” (Rojas, 1997: 132).

nism: “It is one of the curiosities of Communist reformers that they always set out with the quixotic goal of reforming some aspects of their system while keeping others unaffected—introducing market-oriented incentives while maintaining central planning controls, or allowing greater freedom of expression while retaining the Party’s monopoly of truth” (Judt, 2007:603). He adds that in Central Europe and the Soviet Union, “partial reform or reform of one sector in isolation from others was inherently contradictory,” this leading to those regimes’ collapse (Judt, 2007:603). So far, the case of Cuba shows that this kind of contradiction can be sustainable.

### Opening and Closing in Cuba

In Cuban official cultural milieu and for some *Cubanólogos*, it is acceptable to identify the five years from the Congress on Education and Culture of 1971 to the creation of the Ministry of Culture in 1976 as the *Quinquenio Gris*, the only (or main) period of harsh cultural repression in Cuba (Kirk and Padura, 2001; Weppeler-Grogan, 2010). Whether the “gray years” lasted for 5 years, 15 (Mario Coyula’s *Trinquenio Amargo*) or more, is open to discussion. The late 1970s and early 1980s were periods of relative tolerance, compared to previous years, but the evidence is contradictory (Miller, 2008). One could argue, with Rafael Rojas, that the 1980s were more tolerant than the 1990s, a decade of relative relaxation of control in the economic and cultural fields according to most observers.

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam (1995) writes that most of the sixties took place during the 1970s. In Cuba, much of the infamous 1970s took place ... during the 1960s. The idea that during the 1960s the Cuban revolution was a “locomotora cultural” for the whole continent (Gilman, 2003: 78) should be interpreted literally: Fidel Castro put cultural policy firmly on (his) rails, going in one direction. The fact that “realist socialism” was never imposed as the only possible paradigm in the cultural field mightily impressed many intellectuals of the time as a sure sign that Cuban communism was different (think of Su-

san Sontag or Jean-Paul Sartre for instance). Still, the presence of more than one group and tendency, vying for recognition by Fidel, never meant that the cultural field was genuinely open or tolerant. Che Guevara was clear on this point in *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba* (1968): “no se puede oponer al realismo socialista ‘la libertad,’ porque ésta no existe todavía” (Guevara, 1968: 93). This was not a liberal environment, but rather, a fanatic one, featuring a vigorous competition between groups and tendencies for recognition by the political leadership.<sup>12</sup> As Linda Howe explained in her book, at the time many young artists and authors were “caught in the ideological crossfire at the beginning of their careers,” some with tragic consequences (Howe, 1994: 186). In a way, the advent of Soviet-like orthodoxy in the 1970s, like the commencement of socialist realism in the USSR in the 1930s, marked the end of strident altercations and the beginning of a more peaceful and predictable politico-cultural environment (Fitzpatrick, 1992: 10–11).

It is well known that by the end of 1961, independent cultural institutions or media no longer existed on the island. In the first years following the downfall of Batista cultural institutions (e.g., the art schools) and universities were thoroughly purged of their politically undesirable elements (Loomis, 2011). Independent or semi-independent cultural magazines were shut down during the first half of the decade (*Lunes de Revolución* in 1961; *El Puente* in 1965). Even dissonant *malgré lui* cultural supplement *El Caimán Barburdo* (under Jesús Díaz) and *El Sable* (a graphic weekly supplement to *Juventud Rebelde*) misjudged the parameters and were taken down (Grenier, 2014a). Many important cultural figures soon took the road of exile (Lydia Cabrera, Lino Novás Calvo, Celia Cruz, Ernesto Lecuona, Herminio Portell Vilá) whereas others soon found themselves in “internal exile” (José Lezama Lima, Virgilio Piñera, Dulce María Loynaz, César López, Antón Arrufat, Heberto Padilla, Reinaldo Arenas, Nancy Morejón, Miguel Barnet), if not in labor

12. An interesting parallel can be made with the USSR during the 1920s, with radical groups like Proletkult (Proletarian Culture) and RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers).

camps (Walterio Carbonell). In theatre, art and architecture repression and intimidation had already wreaked havoc by the middle of the decade (Loomis, 2011).<sup>13</sup> The infamous Luis Pavón of the *Quiquenio Gris* had his counterpart in the first half of the 1960s: Edith García Buchaca. The infamous UMAP were put in place in 1965 and lasted until 1968. Some authors acknowledge that the *grande noirceur* started at the end of the 1960s rather than in 1971 (Rojas, 1997a: 130–131; Hernández, 2009; Farber, 2012: 81). But the myth of the liberal 1960s (incidentally, not unlike the myth of the non-totalitarian Lenin in 1917–22 in the USSR) is tenacious.

Many observers see the opening and closing in the cultural field as the result of pressures from writers and artists and their cultural institutions, such as *Casa de las Américas*, UNEAC, ICAIC and even the Ministry of Culture (Navarro, 2002: 193). But all of these are clearly state institutions (though the UNEAC presents itself as a NGO) designed to control the cultural field and to implement government policies. As Armando Hart once put it: “Los institutos y consejos no son parte del gobierno: están subordinados al gobierno, que es algo distinto. Son instituciones culturales, no gubernamentales, subordinadas al gobierno” (in *Protección del Patrimonio Cultural*, 2002: 6).

There is no question that negotiations do take place between individuals, institutions and the political leadership—what Cuban sociologist Haroldo Dilla calls “las precariedades de la subordinación negociada” (Dilla, 2007). All the same, periods of openings are not pure fiction with no real consequences. Opening in the economic field, either legally or just tolerated (what is known in China as “one eye open, one eye shut”),<sup>14</sup> has been embarrassingly successful whenever it was tried in any Communist country. In the cultural field the relaxing of control has yielded real benefits for all. Rather, the point here is to understand the logic (and the expected benefits) that prompts regimes to take the risk of opening up.

Opening the cultural field, no less than opening the economy (think of the Special period in Cuba, the NEP and *Perestroika* in the Soviet Union, Deng’s economic reforms in China, *Doi moi* [renovation] in Vietnam, and the likes), is never one-dimensional, comprehensive or irreversible. It is a directed opening, involving decentralization, not real autonomy.

## LAMPEDUSIAN CHANGES IN CULTURAL POLICY

“Long gone are the days when artists waited, in happy or frightened ignorance, for successive instructions concerning speedy fulfillment of the five-year plan! Today every artist is a minor politician of culture. We prepare our innovations so as to bid competitively for the creation of an official aesthetic. In our eyes the state represents not a monolithic body of rules but rather a live network of lobbies”

Miklós Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison, Artists under State Socialism*, 78.

The leaders of self-proclaimed “revolutionary” regimes typically see themselves as enablers of an authentic “cultural revolution.” This has been true whether they were of the fascist, communist or Islamist variety (in 1986, for instance, Ayatollah Khomeini established the Supreme Council for the Cultural Revolution in Iran).

In Cuba since 1959 the ambitious goal of the “revolution” has been to create “a new man in a new society.” Official documents talk about *La Revolución* as “the most important cultural fact of our history.” The motto of the First Congress of Cuban Writers and Artists in 1961 was “To Defend the Revolution is to Defend Culture.” And one may add, to defend culture is to defend the Revolution. Heberto Padilla recalled: “The congress ended its sessions by giving unanimous approval to the new government” (Padilla, 1990: 50). And cultural policy in Cuba is “la política cultural de Fidel” (Armando Hart, in *Protección del Patrimonio Cultural*, 2002: 20).

13. “The theater probably more than any other medium lends itself to the duel between artists and censor which is a prime reason why drama was politically the most lively of the Soviet arts in the early Seventies” (Smith, 517).

14. Looking at the case of Cuba, sociologist Haroldo Dilla calls this “tolerance by omission” (Dilla, 2005: 36–37).

Yet, communist parties rarely make their top positions available to artists, writers or intellectuals—the Italian Communist Party being the exception.<sup>15</sup> When in power, they put in place institutions to control the cultural field, which prevents rather than promotes the emergence of genuine intellectuals.<sup>16</sup> As Czeslaw Milosz wrote in *The Captive Mind*, communist cultural policy “fortifie les petits talents et mutila les grands” [it strengthens modest talents and mutilates great ones] (Milosz, 1988: 206). For all their professed commitment to culture and *l’humanité*, Communist leaders mostly see cultural policy as a tool for massification and indoctrination.

To explain why the Cuban government is tolerating a certain level of criticism in the literary production, Cuban writer Wendy Guerra said “The jefes don't read,” [...] They are just trying to avoid being singled out internationally, and they think it's better to publish us than to get into problems about something which they think has no importance” (quoted in Anderson, 2013). This may be true of Raúl but not of Fidel, who does read (though not literature). Her point is still valid: in a post-totalitarian environment, to paraphrase what Octavio Paz said about the PRI in Mexico, the regime does not want to save man: it only wants to save itself.

Communist countries typically grant some privileges to its elite, and the cultural field is no exception.<sup>17</sup> But in Cuba today successful artists are arguably part of the wealthiest 1 percent of the population. This seems unusual, although the idea of luring writers

and artists with material incentives is not unique to Cuba.<sup>18</sup> Since the 1990s, trends in the economic and cultural fields mirror each other. In both fields, the gatekeeper state selectively relaxed control to the benefit of some. To the dollarization, the luring of foreign capital and the expansion of touristic enclaves in the economy, corresponds the selective opening of the cultural field to global market forces, creating what Guillermina De Ferrari (2009) called Cuba's “curated culture.” After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the government was too preoccupied with the economic situation (not to mention the *balseros* crisis, the sinking of a tugboat in Havana Bay, and the riots in Havana) to spend much time and energy micro-managing artistic production. Many artists (more so than writers) left the country for good during that time, which in a way simplified the situation for the government but created the challenge of sustaining a strong and loyal cultural sector.

As usual, the objective for the regime was to adapt to the new circumstances, so that things would “stay as they are.” Thus changes were implemented, but as the minister of Culture (1997–2012) and former President of UNEAC Abel Prieto wrote in *La Gaceta de Cuba* in 1997, “no existe ninguna política cultural alternativa a la política martiana y fidelista que se inauguró en 1961 con *Palabras a los intelectuales*” (quoted in Lucien, 2006:144).

For two decades, visual artists have been able to sell their works abroad, even to Americans (art is not covered by the US embargo since the Berman

15. In 1936 Stalin started to use the term “intelligentsia” to represent one of the three main entities in society (aside the workers and the peasants). However, by intelligentsia he meant the cultural and administrative elite of society (himself included). Fitzpatrick, 1992: 15.

16. As Cuban writer Arturo Arango said: “La figura del intelectual clásico a lo Zola, o, en términos más contemporáneos, a lo Monsi-váis, Poniatowska, Saramago, Benedetti, Galeano, entre los de izquierdas, o Paz, Vargas Llosa, entre los de derechas, creadores de opinión, poseedores de una vasta audiencia ciudadana, no ha sido permitida en la política cubana” (Arango, 2009: 16).

17. “Kim Il-sung, called Great Leader, was to create a Soviet-supported national film studio, where he gave filmmakers and crews preferential food rations and housing.” Paul Fischer, “North Korea's fear of Hollywood,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 2014.

18. Vietnam, according to Nguyen Qui Duc (2014), “has entered yet another era in its history of cultural control. Forget apparatchiks with comb-overs and coordinated suits trying to protect the revolution against degenerate thought. The people who now run Vietnam's publishing houses, film festivals and cultural exchange programs are artists—many of whom were once censored under Communism—and they have been co-opted by the lure of condos, cars and washing machines.” He adds “the new enforcers of these old restrictions are driven less by ideological purity than by a mixed bag of political correctness and market-driven concerns.”

amendment of 1988).<sup>19</sup> Both the artists and the state have benefited from the inflow of hard currencies. Living in Cuba with dollars or CUCs, better living conditions and a considerable safety net provided by cultural institutions (e.g., state galleries and museums, bienales, UNEAC, Brigada Hermanos Saíz, IC-AIC, Fondo Cubano de Bienes Culturales, Consejo Nacional de las Artes Plásticas), makes living on the edge of the parameters in Cuba attractive compared to the uncertain and competitive world of exile (Arango, 1997; Johnson, 2003; Geoffray, 2008). According to Rachel Weiss, “The complicity of this softer and more tactical alliance [between the state and artists] largely replaced the need for a continuing censorship of the harsher variety [...] Commerce was the new politics in the new Cuban art, and, as before, artists found themselves both critical and complicit. What was perhaps different than before, though, was that they no longer seemed angry” (Weiss, 1990: 219, 223).

What is offered to artists and writers is a comfort zone (Grenier, 2014b), which as Antonio José Ponte explains, translates into *time* to step back and focus on one’s oeuvre. But the pendulum can swing back to a period of “rectification” and writers and artists—“engineers of the soul” (Stalin’s USSR), “soldiers on the Cultural Front” (North Korea), “soldiers of art” (Vietnam)—could be mobilized again. As Haraszti wrote: “the artist, a soldier armed with paint-brush or pen under Stalinism, is, after de-Stalinization, demobilized and returned to civilian life. He remains, however, very much on active duty, in the reserves, as it were, always aware that his status

might change the moment war is declared” (Haraszti, 1987: 97).<sup>20</sup>

Artists and writers who are interested in political themes (there are apparently fewer and fewer of those)<sup>21</sup> do it in part for external consumption and in an anesthetized way that may provoke a frisson for the few aficionados but remain largely inconsequential in the public sphere. For decades Cuba exported its opposition (about 15% of the population, roughly the same percentage in East Germany’s exodus from 1949 to 1961); now it also exports mildly critical art and literature, thereby defusing tensions in the island and reaping both political capital and dollars through taxation. Artists who play by the rules have been able to leave *and return* to their country, on their own, for two decades. Ordinary Cubans were only granted this basic universal right (see Art.13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) last January, while “exiled” Cubans are still denied the right to return to the island.

From discussions I had with Cuban visual artists living in Cuba, it seems that censorship is not as overt as it used to be. They are usually not told directly and explicitly that their work is being censored or banned, since “fuera de la estricta conversación policial, las autoridades evitan siempre pronunciarse” (Ponte, 234). The works are censored rather than the writers or artists, especially if they are well established. Censorship is largely made of “reglas no escritas” (Ponte, 2010: 74) and takes many forms. Official cultural institutions can simply ignore a writer or an artist (Mexicans would say *ningunear*), like for instance Wendy Guerra or Pedro Juan Gutiérrez.<sup>22</sup>

19. “Law-decree no. 145 of 17 November 1993, on the conditions of labor for creators of literary works, acknowledges the status as worker of creators whose artistic work is not linked to an institution, and at the same time establishes a Ministry of Culture registry for such works. Law-decrees No.105 (5 August 1998) and No.144 (19 November 1993) had established these same rights for visual artists and musicians, respectively. As stated on a Cuban government’s website on cultural legislations, these law-decrees recognized the possibility of artistic work performed independently from a state institution.” See Esther Whitfield, “Truths and Fictions: The Economics of Writing, 1994–1999,” pp. 21–36 in Hernández-Reguant ed., 2009.

20. Richard Wolin reminds us though that the Nazi regime preferred to deal with public intellectuals who were broadly in agreement with Nazi principles rather than with pure ideologues. Wolin, 2006:93.

21. During the 1990s “most artists chose not to directly collide with revolutionary ideology, strategically insisting instead on the separation of art from politics” (Hernández-Reguant, 2009: 11).

22. For writer Wendy Guerra: “One of the ways Cuba’s socialist system has to disqualify you has always been to disappear your name.” Quoted in Anderson, 2013.

Some artists or genre are favoured in the media (reggaetón in music for instance), while others are not (singers-songwriters Frank Delgado or Pedro Luis Ferrer). Writers and artists who are somewhat critical of the status quo and who are well known abroad are given a more comfortable niche within the cultural field, from which they can do their work and get some exposure. For instance an author like Leonardo Padura is celebrated in the island (he received the Premio Nacional de Literatura in 2012) and abroad, but his books are still hard to find in bookstores.

The number of individuals involved in censorship is seemingly unlimited. Once a case goes up the chain of decision it is not clear where it stops. One painter told me that in one particular case (a work featuring Fidel and other survivors of the Granma landing in December of 1956 as the “12 apostles”), he thinks that Fidel himself approved the decision to present it to the public.<sup>23</sup> The safe decision for someone at the bottom of the “censorship chain” is simply to refuse projects. Once the project is approved at a lower level, it can subsequently be rejected at a higher level, even after the work has been approved for presentation to the public. In this case those involved in the original decision will be in trouble, probably more so than the artist himself/herself. In fact, for the artist, modest reprimand is the homage paid by the state to the artist for producing a work of significance. In this game the artist and his government contact/censor work together rather than against each other, to find appropriate “space” for artistic expression.<sup>24</sup> And to repeat, if things go wrong, the top leadership and its followers can always blame “bureaucrats” for “mistakes.”

### Testing the Parameters

Generally speaking, the dissonance coming from the cultural field is rather tame, even though pretty much everybody claims to be somewhat critical of the status quo. And yet, there are cases that illuminate the dilemmas facing writers and artists when

they simply try to speak their mind “within the revolution.”

Jesús Díaz (1941–2002) was a major player on the politico-cultural scene in Havana and Madrid. He was a pure product of the Cuban revolution: he benefited from it, but he was also victimized by the regime he wanted to serve. He left the island in 1992 and became a prominent dissident (first in Berlin and then in Madrid), at a time when artists were leaving the country en masse. Jesús Díaz’s rupture with the Fidelista state came as a result of a public speech he gave in Switzerland on February 2, 1992. He was participating in a roundtable organized by a left-leaning Swiss publication (*Woken Zeitung*). Somewhat unexpectedly the event turned into a debate on Cuba between Díaz and Uruguayan essayist Eduardo Galeano (Simmen, 2002: 67). The organizers may have seen it coming: months before Díaz had given an interview to *Der Spiegel* (N° 41 de 1991), in which he presented as “tragic” the alternative “Castro or Washington.” Several weeks later, his text, entitled *Los anillos de la serpiente* (The snake’s rings), was printed in the Spanish daily *El País* (March 12) and reproduced in several newspapers in other countries as well. It was even published in the UNEAC’s *La Gaceta de Cuba*, followed by a blistering rebuttal by (this is typical) one of Díaz’s old collaborators in *El Caimán Barbudo* and *Pensamiento Crítico*, Fernando Martínez Heredia. Then came an “unofficial” letter of condemnation by the Minister of Culture Armando Hart, in which Díaz was called a traitor who deserve nothing less than the death penalty. The letter, which circulated in Cuba, was never formally sent to Díaz. For his “treason,” Díaz was expelled from the communist party and the UNEAC. That letter made Díaz a Cuban exile. As Díaz put it: “No me quedé. Me dejaron, detalle no mínimo, creo yo” (in Collmann, 1999: 164).

In his text Díaz condemns the “criminal” US “blockade,” but he also condemns tourism “apartheid” on

23. “Although Fidel deliberately mythified the figure after 1959 by casting his followers in the apostolic role of ‘The Twelve’ and himself as Jesus, survivors originally numbered twenty” (Guerra, 2012: 16).

24. For Cuban curator Gerardo Mosquera: “Since the [1980s], censorship has become more cynical, and some officials even discuss with artists what is allowed in their works—almost as if it were a technical problem.” Quoted in Weiss, 2011: Note 97, pp.299–300.

the island and calls “criminal” the official slogan “Socialism or Death.” Last but not least, he calls for an end to the “blockade” *in exchange* for the convocation of a plebiscite in the island on the political future of the country. This was (and still is) taboo in Cuba, and it squarely put him *fuera del juego* (out of the game). Díaz said he knew that the Cuban government wouldn’t like his talk, “Pero yo no creía que la respuesta iba a ser la carta de Armando Hart. Eso no me lo imaginaba” (in Collmann, 1999: 151–52). Again, in retrospect, he said that “En esa época, 1991, 1992, yo creía que había un margen mayor dentro de la isla que el que realmente existía.” In a letter to Miguel Rivero, he wrote: “No vine decidido a quedarme. Es más, si hubiera una mínima posibilidad de debate en Cuba habría regresado. Intenté abrir ese espacio con ‘Los anillos de la serpiente,’ que conoces. Sin embargo, Galeano, Hart y en última instancia el gobierno cubano se interpusieron en mi camino. Después de la carta del Ministro quedé colgado, volver era hacerlo a la cárcel y te confieso que no tuve valor. Muchas veces me reprocho el no estar preso en Cuba y me deprimó” (Díaz, 2002). This was the last (but not the first) time Díaz unwittingly crossed the line of the permissible, which is fascinating since conceivably, he, of all people, should have known better.

The literature on the cultural scene during the 1990s never fails to mention the importance of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s movie *Fresa y chocolate* (1994), based on Senel Paz’s short story *El Lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* (1990), as a breakthrough. The movie is invariably presented, even by Minister of Culture Abel Prieto (1997–2012), as *the* evidence of liberalization of culture in Cuba during the 1990s. The film was definitely a sign of progress in Cuba, but one should remember that Gutiérrez Alea uncommonly met both conditions for getting a bit more space within the cultural field: he was internationally renowned

and enjoyed Fidel’s recognition.<sup>25</sup> In Cuba, the political is personal. Furthermore, the movie itself meets an important condition: the action takes place during the 1970s, so it denounces past errors. Gutiérrez Alea, who was never a member of the Communist Party, always said that he was neither a counter-revolutionary nor a dissident (in Chanan, 1996: 76). Asked what can be done to address the irremediable “crisis” he sees looming in the country, he answers like a thoughtful teen in a beauty contest: “Bueno, una situación de crisis genera a veces una reacción, una respuesta. Yo creo que la única manera de superarla sería—y quizás estoy respondiendo a un sentimiento cristiano muy idealista—a través de la comprensión y el amor entre los hombres” (in Chanan, 1996: 76).

In 2011, visual artist Pedro Pablo Oliva, winner of the National Arts Award in 2006, publicly stated his preference for a multiparty system. This comes close to crossing the line of the primary parameters. With this intervention he instantly became *persona non grata* in the art establishment. He was stripped of his position in the Provincial Assembly of People’s Power (mostly an honorific position). More importantly, he had to close his popular workshop. As his case became well known in Cuba and abroad, he received some support from fellow artists and also from the vice-minister of culture (Fernando Rojas) and from *Juventud Rebelde*.<sup>26</sup> The government tried not to provoke a complete and spectacular rupture with a prominent and much liked artist. On his blog, Oliva insisted that he supports the Revolution, that he is not a dissident and never accepted support from abroad.<sup>27</sup> All he wanted was the right to express his views, which he obviously thought was his natural right within the Revolution. In September 2014, censorship struck Oliva again. This time the president of the Consejo Nacional de las Artes Plásticas (Rubén del Valle) came in person to announce the

25. Hedrick Smith wrote that the mildly critical movie *The Red Snowball Tree* (1974) by Vasily Shukshin was released in the Soviet Union “because Brezhnev was moved to tears by it” (Smith, 1984: 511).

26. <http://www.diariodecuba.com/derechos-humanos/5067-el-caso-de-pedro-pablo-oliva-abre-un-debate-sobre-la-intolerancia-en-la-isla>.

27. <http://www.pedropablooliva.com/home.php>.

“decision” made (typically, Oliva is not told by whom) to cancel his upcoming exhibition *Utopías y disidencias*. Del Valle was sad to say that “el contexto actual ... no ofrecía la garantía de condiciones favorables desde un punto de vista que subrayaba como subjetivo.” Oliva’s public declaration on the episode is revelatory: “me pregunto si esto no es una muestra más de la necesidad de cambiar nuestras políticas culturales.”<sup>28</sup> As if the government’s assault on freedom of expression was a problem of fine-tuning cultural policy!

In 2013, the leader of the Cuban jazz-fusion combo Interactivo, Robertico Carcassés, improvised lyrics calling for “direct presidential elections,” “freedom of information” and “the end of the blockade and the auto-blockade” during a televised concert in front of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana. Cuban officials suspended Carcassés from performing on the island “indefinitely,” but he was not incarcerated, perhaps because he was publicly defended by other musicians, including Silvio Rodríguez, who is arguably the most prominent cultural ambassador of the regime. Carcassés’s criticism was bold, considering where and when it happened, even when weighted against his declaration on not being a “dissident” and condemning both the US “blockade” and the incarceration of the five “heroes.” Other members of the music establishment made public comments about the need for change in Cuba over the past few years: Rodríguez himself, Pablo Milanés and Carlos Varela, to name a few. But irreverence toward officialdom is much more common in the fringe of the music industry in Cuba: e.g., rappers, hip-hop and punk-rock artists more or less marginalized or persecuted by the government (Fernandes, 2006; Alberto, 1997: 203–204). In fact, music is the most popular art form in Cuba, and for that reason singers and musicians are best positioned in the cultural field to be agents of change in the country.

A type of censorship that is apparently destined to prosper in the age of the gatekeeper state is illustrated by the recent case of Rafael Alcides, a well known

poet from the 1950s generation. He recently renounced to his UNEAC membership and returned the *Medalla Conmemorativa* he received as a founding member of the organization. He did this when Cuban authorities censored him, preventing entry into the country of his own books published abroad. “En vista de que ya a mis libros no los dejan entrar en Cuba ni por la Aduana ni por el correo, lo que es igual a prohibirme como autor, renuncio a la UNEAC,” Alcides wrote in a letter to UNEAC’s president Miguel Barnet.<sup>29</sup> Books deemed undesirable in Cuba can still be published and circulate abroad, generating fame to their authors and revenue for both the writer and the state. This often (but not always) makes tolerable the restrictions on their circulation in the island.

These few examples illustrate how the regime’s master narrative is used by the opposition to legitimize actions that test the parameters (Geoffray, 2008). All of these writers and artists claimed to be expressing views from within the Revolution. This suggests that the revolutionary rhetoric can be a double-edged sword for the regime in place. Looking at the Soviet Union, political scientist Ivan Krastev argues that “The USSR’s collapse showed that ideology corrodes autocratic regimes in two ways: it feeds the reformist delusions of the elites, and it gives the regime’s opponents a language and a platform by holding up an ideal against which the regime can be measured and found wanting” (Krastev, 2011). The revolutionary tradition is older than the current generation of rulers and perhaps they can’t completely own it and control its use by the Cuban people. And yet, the evidence suggests that the government manipulation of this tradition is very successful as a mechanism of control. The cases mentioned above are typical: all of them wanted to fit in, to participate, and to be recognized within the revolution. They are not “counter-revolutionary.” They can find legitimacy within the dominant ideology by asking the government to do more to meet the ideal of *La Revolución*, but by doing so, they are trapping themselves into an ideological

28. [http://www.diariodecuba.com/cultura/1411145496\\_10479.html](http://www.diariodecuba.com/cultura/1411145496_10479.html).

29. [http://www.diariodecuba.com/cultura/1404334956\\_9336.html](http://www.diariodecuba.com/cultura/1404334956_9336.html).

construct designed to legitimize the permanent tenure of the Revolution's self-appointed avant-garde. Sujantha Fernandes talks about the artists' role in the emergence of "new revolutionary cultures" in Cuba. In fact, only the emancipation *from* this revolutionary mythology (and the defense of due process and the rule of law) could truly be revolutionary in Cuba.

The failure (in fact, the impossibility) to address the central issue of all policies in Cuba (Fidel and Raúl's absolute power) at times reverberates as self-criticism. For instance, in an interview published in 1997, author Senel Paz deplores the lack of criticism in Cuba but adds: "I believe we are much freer than we often think we are and that we should begin by demonstrating this to ourselves" (Paz in Resik, 1997: 89). He continues: "... we revolutionaries don't always know how to debate among ourselves, so what should be a discussion of ideas, a polemic, is often simplified, vulgarized, and turned into a confrontation, sometimes even becoming a race to see who can first accuse the other of being a counterrevolutionary" (Paz in Resik, 1997: 87). He talks about mistakes made in the past: "... it was not so much a problem of literature and art as one of cultural politics, that is, a political problem. The politicians made mistakes and those writers targeted by the criteria and values that prevailed then were harshly penalized: they couldn't publish or otherwise publicly express themselves, and they were prohibited from traveling. Whether we like it or not, it is an important part of our history, and we'd do better to learn from it than to repress it. Politicians have a propensity to quickly turn the page on which they look bad. But luckily this is all water under the bridge for today's writers, who feel no resentment or animosity" (Paz in Resik, 1997: 88). Here mistakes took place in the past and "politicians" do not refer to the only politician that matters in the country, but to bureaucrats, public officials who come and go and have no real power of their own.

Tania Bruguera once proclaimed: "Mi trabajo es empujar los límites de la institución; el de ellos, preservarlos, y en esa 'danza,' todos sabemos lo que hace-

mos y que la música se acaba, pero estoy orgullosa de la tolerancia de la institución y de mi exigencia como artista."<sup>30</sup> In a democracy, to have "limits" and to be treated with "tolerance" by government institutions is not something to be satisfied with or proud of. In a paternalistic state, on the other end, those are conquests.

Ambrosio Fornet, one of the foremost intellectuals on the island, to whom we owe the apparently critical but in fact misleading expression "Quinquenio gris," talks about the "art and literature of the Revolution" as if he was talking about France. For him, it has been "equally fostered by caution and audacity, in a climate of trust and tension, has maintained an equilibrium that is not typically expressed in declarations or manifestos but in daily practice, in small skirmishes and concrete works. The difficult and continually renewed consensus in which writers, artists, and cultural institutions are always engaged, sometimes supported and sometimes harassed by bureaucrats and officials, has undergone various dramatic transitions in the last three decades..." (Fornet, 1997: 11). Small skirmishes, consensus building, with harassment predictably coming from "bureaucrats and officials," not from Fidel or Raúl, in a country where pretty much everything has been decided by the Castro brothers and where literary prizes have been ordinarily awarded by the Armed Forces and the Ministry of Interior.

Some significant changes have taken place in the cultural field over the past decades, but those changes have a way of reinforcing rather than eroding the top-down political logic put in place in Cuba more than fifty years ago. Bolder criticism of some long-solved problems in the name of Revolution and without ever mentioning the bull in the china shop, is exactly what the regime needs, especially if criticism remains a confidential discussion within the cultural field.<sup>31</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The opening up of the cultural field over the past two decades took place in a segment that is increas-

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30. Encuentro en la red, April 24, 2009.

ingly globalized and visible to the outside world, such as literature and visual arts. It is done in a way that essentially reinforces the power of the state as a “gatekeeper.” It is easy to wax eloquent about the art scene becoming a substitute for a genuine civil society and a scene of “symbolic resistance” (Geoffray, 2008: 111) and “resistance to authoritarianism” (Mosquera, 1999: 37). The signs of “resistance” are far less evident than the signs of participation and renovation of state control. Pockets of resistance come mostly from popular culture and the margins of the cultural field, not from the cultural establishment.

In Central Europe, according to historian Tony Judt, virtually all “dissidents” framed their opposition to the communist regime “from within” the socialist tradition: “... unlike the New Left in the West, the intellectual revisionists of the East continued to work with, and often within, the Communist Party. This was partly from necessity, of course; but partly too from sincere conviction” (Judt, 2007: 426–7). All of this vanished very quickly after the downfall of communism in the region. With the possible exception of the Czech Republic, writers, artists and public intellectuals played a very limited role in the downfall of these regimes and even less so in the transition period.<sup>32</sup> In Cuba, it is worth recalling, the art and literary scene is tiny and folks mostly talk and debate with each other. The strategy to work “within the revolution” can be understood at both the personal and the political level. It is also easier to be loyal to a cause than to an individual or a government. It is nevertheless clear that by doing so, writers and artists are trapped within a jail of words and a stultifying institutional arrangement.

What do the limited but unique government’s opening in the cultural field tell us about Cuban governance as a whole? Is the milieu of art, as Rachel Weiss

suggested, a “laboratory in which the security machinery could gain experience in dealing with unrest, something it had not really had to contend with previously”? Possibly, but another interpretation is at least equally plausible: after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the government seemed to have learned, perhaps from what Mario Vargas Llosa called the “perfect dictatorship,” i.e., 20th century PRI regime in Mexico, that to maintain a monopoly of power a regime does not need to control everything, especially not in the highbrow corners of the cultural field. The writers and artists who are still in Cuba are mostly there because they want to. Some of them have experienced periods of banishment and accepted to turn the page. Others have carved for themselves a niche that is generally comfortable and allows them to express themselves freely or freely enough, if mostly among themselves.

This opens the discussion on various types of post-totalitarian regimes. One can think of Cuba as a tired, “post-utopian” totalitarian regime, a “totalitarianism with some teeth knocked out” as Solidarity leader Adam Michnik said about Jaruzelski’s Poland. But Cuba may well be an illustration of a different type: post-totalitarianism as a renovation of totalitarianism. In sum, to rephrase Weiss’s hypothesis, the security machinery can gain experience in dealing not with unrest but with *ambition*. As Margaret Thatcher would say, give folks something to lose and they’ll become conservative.

A possible counter-hypothesis, implicit in this paper, can be formulated based on the double intuition that political development is rarely one-dimensional and that opening and reforms can have unanticipated consequences (Van Delden and Grenier, 2009). For all their quests for recognition and participation, writers and artists (and probably scholars in social

31. Arturo Arango draws the same conclusion: “Nuestra actuación política suele ocurrir sólo dentro del campo cultural, y se trata, en lo posible, que esté referida exclusivamente a él. Ello fue muy visible cuando las polémicas desatadas en enero de 2006, y que tuvieron su primer espacio en los correos electrónicos. Cuando la discusión comenzó a abrirse hacia otros foros y problemas de la sociedad, la institución colocó los límites: hablemos de campo cultural, y de nada más. El hecho de que tales debates y sus consecuencias, no pasaran jamás al espacio de la prensa cotidiana es una constatación material de lo que estoy diciendo” (Arango, 2009:16).

32. “The intellectuals who *did* make a successful leap into democratic public life were usually “technocrats”—lawyers or economists—who had played no conspicuous part in the dissenting community before 1989. Not having performed a hitherto heroic role they offered more reassuring models for their similarly un-heroic fellow citizens” (Judt, 695).

sciences and humanities too) are engaged in an activity that is at least potentially disruptive for dominant values and institutions. In the 10th book of *The Republic* Plato says poets are dangerous and in some ways he is right. “All serious art, music and literature

is a *critical* act,” as George Steiner said (Steiner, 1998: 11). Carefully monitored opening in the cultural field and in the economy may work in short term, but one can wonder for how long it is sustainable.

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