



## ARTICLES

### Walking without crutches: culture, politics and critical thought in Cuba

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#### Summary

*The author argues that the development of a high culture in Cuba has created a thinking civil society. The act of thinking implies a critical disposition, a capacity for spiritual and ideological creation of its own. These potentialities and the new contradictions that are being confronted are the vital mirror of a society and a culture that today sees itself capable of fully debating and deciding its present and its future.*


"Why are you using crutches? / Because I am crippled, I answered. / That's not surprising, he replied. / Try again. It's those things that are preventing you from walking. (...) Now I'm cured. I'm walking. A laugh cured me. / Only sometimes, when I see sticks / I walk a little worse for a few hours."

Bertolt Brecht, *The Crutches*

Many of the greatest intellectual works of Cuban culture do not have their origins in the years of maturity but in the creative ferocity and energy of youth. When they were 29, Juan Marinello published *Juventud y vejez*; Fernando Ortiz his classic essay against panhispanism, *La reconquista de America*; Romulo Lachatañeri, *Oh, mío Yemaya*; and Carlos R. Rodríguez, *El marxismo en la historia de Cuba*. Jorge Mañach was 27 when he published *La crisis de la alta cultura en Cuba*, the same age as José Antonio Portuondo when he worked out his *Esquema de interpretación del proceso de la cultura cubana*; Raúl Roa was 28 when he wrote *Bufa subversiva*, and so was Rubén Martínez Villena when he published *Declaración del Grupo Minorista*.

At 23, Cintio Vitier had written *Experiencia de la poesía*, and at 21, Julio Antonio Mella published *Cuba, un pueblo que jamás ha sido libre. La República española ante la Revolución cubana* was printed when José Martí was barely 20. Finally, we should not forget that *La historia me absolverá* (Fidel Castro) is the work of a man of 27; and that the young poet Raúl Gómez García, author of the *Manifiesto del Moncada*, was only 25.

From youth, naturally, comes a good part of this questioning tendency and unorthodox mood. Furthermore, as can be seen in that brief inventory, Cuban thought has distinguished itself, including in those precocious works, by spilling over into the realm of art and literature or social knowledge, into areas such as higher education, the communications media and public debate. Thus, many of its principal exponents express themselves not just through university professorships, books and groups, but also in magazines, associations,



newspapers, radio programs and discussion forums of various kinds where cultural, conceptual and political exchanges and polemics of great interest are aired.

Apart from specific generational groupings, the intermingling of political and cultural discourse has characterized the Cuban public sphere – in various ways, according to the practices of each epoch. It has been a feature that figures in the history of the culture, especially in the way ideas are produced. That intellectual tradition did not construct theoretical, philosophical, or scientific systems that posit a totality according to some unique architecture of thought, but rather a type of knowledge implanted in a multiple theoretical tradition that breaches the walls of any particular discipline and expresses itself in terms of social consciousness.

From what is the desirable political order to the manifestation of genuine art, Cuban intellectual discourse has been affirmed through its criticism of received truths and established ways of thinking and has represented the civic, inseparable from a certain idea (or rather, ideas) about human liberty and fulfillment.


Although some of the works of authors like Ramiro Guerra on history, economy and pedagogy, or Fernando Ortiz on anthropology, ethnology and sociology, contribute to a sociographic description based on empirical data, Cuban social thought in general, including that of these authors, is expressed in conceptual discourse of high-powered critical analysis that reinterprets history and its social environment from various civic and political points of view.

Without a historical perspective it would be very difficult to explore deeply the process of Cuban thought and culture with all their competing complexities and contradictions before and after January 1959, with its pros and cons. Nor would it be possible to approach complex issues such as those regarding social consciousness, the actual nation, the emerging society, the types and modes of cultural and ideological debates, and the difficult and often crucial relationships between culture and politics.

### **A critical recovery of the past**

A triumphant revolution that questioned established truths, received from the liberal culture and from the communist movement as well, augured well for Cuban art and social thought. Fidel Castro's *Palabras a los intelectuales* (1961) and Che Guevara's *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba* (1965) did not lock the new culture away in a set of prescriptions and ideological orientations, nor did they imprison thought in a canon. Instead, they championed freedom of creation and critical thinking.

Fidel's phrase, so often cited, almost always incorrectly, "Within the revolution, everything; against the revolution, nothing," is usually quoted without its indispensable context. At the end of one of those talk sessions with intellectuals, artists and leaders in June 1961, Fidel declared that the new revolutionary culture was open to revolutionaries as well as non-revolutionaries, and would



only exclude those who actively opposed the newly proclaimed popular democracy.


"It is possible that men and women, who have a truly revolutionary attitude in the current reality, do not make up a majority of the population. The revolution should maintain a majority, not only of revolutionaries, but also of all honest citizens. The Revolution should only turn away those who are incorrigible counterrevolutionaries. And, the Revolution must have a policy for that part of the population so that everyone in that sector of artists and intellectuals who are not genuinely revolutionary may find that they have a space to work and to create within the Revolution; and that their creative spirit will have the freedom to express itself. This means that within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing. This is a general principle for all citizens; it is a fundamental principle of the Revolution" (Castro, 1961).

Neither artistic and intellectual creation, education, the universities, employment, nor any civil rights are defined here as the exclusive domain of revolutionary militants. The message of liberation includes everyone. For his part, Che explicitly rejected socialist realism, the role of the artist as a docile paid servant of official thinking and a mere propagandist for the regime, which was typical of Eastern European socialism. He warned against functionaries who attempt to impose their tastes and preferences as official policy (Guevara, 1965).

But beyond those discourses, the revolution transformed the way of thinking about culture. The multiplicity of diverse currents of thought that flowed together in Cuba during the decade of the 1960s came not just from the magnetic halo of the revolution but from its own impact in the field of ideas, derived from the cultural and educational policies of the revolutionary government. This cannot be explained without the energizing of Cuban civil society during that period.

This new critical thought appeared because the revolution renewed national culture, opened it to the world and created a new reading public. Some of the most important political magazines of the time, such as *Cuba Socialista*, *Teoría y Práctica* and *Pensamiento Crítico*, collected speeches, analyses and polemics that had a theoretical, political and philosophic content. Other publications such as *Casa de las Américas*, *La Gaceta de Cuba*, cultural supplements of daily newspapers - *Lunes de Revolución*, *El Caimán Barbudo*, *Hoy Domingo* - and others like the magazine *Nuestra Industria*, contained polemics concerning cultural problems as well as economic, political and ideological issues of the socialist transition during an exceptional era when even high-level political leaders participated along with intellectuals, artists and writers in the debate over ideas. Other Cuban politicians such as Armando Hart, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, Osvaldo Dorticós and Alfredo Guevara, also made significant contributions to critical thought.

Although this heterodox revolution did not follow the path laid out in the canonical texts of Marxism-Leninism from the publisher Progress in Moscow, those manuals circulated from the early 1960s. There also very soon arose a critique of manualism. This criticism of a supposed science of socialism did not come about only or principally from social and cultural thought, but also from intellectuals of the political vanguard.




He criticized that dogmatism for affirming - even claiming to be scientific truth - that the experience of building socialism in the Soviet Union (its history) was the science of socialist transition. "The idea of socialism was confused with what occurred in practice in the USSR" (Guevara, 2006:156). His analysis of the Soviet experience in the period of the post-Stalinist thaw warned that "after a long lethargy characterized by the most careless justifications, the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) changed directions but not toward the future. Compromised by the exhaustion of development possibilities and pressured by the superstructure, the Soviet leaders took steps backwards. After the lethargy came repression, but both things maintained the same dogmatic characteristics" (Guevara, 2006:194).

Fidel would say unequivocally that the lack of adequate political education was due to the abuse of the manuals on Marxism-Leninism, which he criticized as "anachronistic," and for opening a "huge gap" between "general conceptions and practical concepts, between philosophy and reality." He said that "the Revolutionary Instruction schools," reduced the problems of socialism to vague, abstract generalities without content," and were training "militants ignorant about many of the most serious problems of the contemporary world."

The academic discourse of the manuals - as Fidel said - takes up "thorny problems" of political order, at the center of which is the question of "how communism should be constructed," and consequently, some countries "were deeply offended and tended to stare like lost sheep at a people who are not following the beaten path even though that path led nowhere" (Castro, 1968). These differences with Soviet socialism, and also with the Chinese and with the countries of Eastern Europe, marked the political culture of the 1960s.

Its content was not characterized by differences over policy contingencies, which are susceptible to idealism, voluntarism or other errors typical of the period, but by basic concepts about what socialism is. In the same speech in which Cuba aligned itself with the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, Fidel went over these differences. This speech, which is not entirely unrelated to the approach known in political science as realism, involves, at the same time, an essential critique of Eastern European socialism (see Castro, 1968b).

"The decision [of the Warsaw Pact to intervene] in Czechoslovakia can only be explained from a political not a legal point of view; it has absolutely no legal basis. We might ask whether, after 20 years, it is worthwhile for a revolution to resort to such procedures in order to survive. Cuban students have often returned filled with dissatisfaction, with disgust, and have told us informally, 'the young people there are not educated in the ideals of communism, or internationalism. They are highly influenced by all the ideas and tastes of the Western countries of Europe.' And, really, they do not develop an international communist consciousness. [There are] a series of opinions, ideas, practices that are incomprehensible to us, that have contributed to a relaxing and softening of the revolutionary spirit of the socialist countries and ignorance about the problems of the underdeveloped world. [The] direction Czechoslovakia was generally going in for 20 years - loaded with many vices, with dogmatism, bureaucratism - cannot be used as a model for a true revolutionary direction. We ask ourselves if by chance, future relations of the communist parties will be based on their principled positions or will they go on being governed by



obedience, subservience and servility, and if those who simply accept everything willy-nilly and are absolutely incapable of disagreeing about anything are the ones to be considered friends" (Castro, 1968b).


An influential sector of the left in Europe, the United States and Latin America, reacted only to that part of the speech that was in support of the invasion, and ignored the other dimension - the critique of socialism established in the socialist bloc - as well as the reaffirmation of the Third World socialist perspective: "The decision of the Warsaw Pact governments was based on the principle that no one can ever be allowed to break a single link in the community of socialist states. And we ask ourselves, are Viet Nam, Korea and Cuba links in the socialism camp that can not be broken by the imperialists, or not? Will divisions of the Warsaw Pact also be sent to Viet Nam if the Yankee imperialists increase their aggression against that country and if the people of Viet Nam ask for help? Will divisions of the Warsaw Pact also be sent to Cuba if the Yankee imperialists attack our country, or even, in the face of the threat of attack by the Yankee imperialists against our country, if our country asks for it?" (Castro, 1968b).

Cuba's serious concern in that extraordinary year 1968 resulted from its perception of the weakening experienced by socialism around the world, under circumstances characterized by the Sino-Soviet split and the heightened menace of the United States. Regardless of agreeing today or not with the Cuban position on the Soviet intervention 40 years ago, this controversial speech remains an exemplar of critical thought that openly and frankly airs its differences before friends and enemies. It is worthwhile to note that even in such a situation, when the country was threatened by a serious external danger, the Cuban government didn't express concern through restricted diplomatic channels. Nor was there a need to confine the debate inside the institutions of government, but rather on the contrary; it had to be aired in the best possible space for revolutionary policy: the public sphere.

Nevertheless, cultural policy and space for public debate within Cuban socialism during the 1960s were not without their distortions. To mention only the fields of culture and thought, the counterproductive political treatment in the Padilla case (in 1968 and later in 1971), the discrimination against homosexuals and religious believers, the generalized proscription of the works of writers and artists who had left the country, the prohibitions against rock or jazz music (along with beards, long hair and miniskirts), the purging of centers of higher education and other institutions based on 'political' or 'moral' motives, as well as other manifestations of extremism, sectarianism and verticalism, were somebitter fruits of those final years of the decade.

With what Ambrosio Fornet has called the grey period - between the Congress on Education and Culture in 1971 and the foundation of the ministry of culture in 1976 - the pressures on discourse and cultural practices would be increased, not only in areas such as literature, theater and artistic education, but also in the social sciences, higher education, the media, the institutional order, juridical concepts, and a part of ideological production.

In the area of social thought, the shadow of sovietization - that which was imposed from without and that which was deliberately imported - lasted at least a decade and a half, until the mid-1980s, and its effects lingered for the



remainder of the decade. In the area of thought, this dogmatic influence created a kind of intellectual prostration in which anything that was different from the Soviet model, or came from another social science or theoretical current, was proscribed. This included almost all Latin American, Asian and African thought and, of course, whatever was going on in the developed countries of the West.

During this time, periodicals were publishing artistic creations, but with very little reflection, and with especially limited critical and conceptual elaboration on the problems of national culture and social knowledge. The same thing happened with most of the titles that were published in the social sciences and cultural studies.


Still, it would be simplistic to paint a picture of a generalized intellectual blackout during those years, or to dismiss as insignificant the progressive effects on Cuban social development. The existence of the Ministry of Culture in 1976 contributed to the opening of a space for creativity. Implementation of Soviet realism was contained, although it was embraced by some promoters in the bureaucracy, and also by articulate exponents in the intellectual world both during the gray period and beyond. Although debate and criticism remained substantially limited in some institutions created within the cultural system, certain enclaves of creative thought were slowly establishing themselves as part of a process that was not free of setbacks.

Despite all of the restrictions imposed in the 1970s and a good part of the 1980s, film and book production exposed Cubans, avid for what was then called cultural self-improvement, to a variety of authors, cultures and diverse representations. In the Cuba of the 1970s and the early 1980s, more diverse films were shown and more varied literary works were made available than in any other country in this hemisphere.

The institutional censorship that actually existed did not prevent anyone at all - not just intellectuals, artists or officials - from reading extraordinary authors and seeing extraordinary film. In bookstores, one could buy at minimal prices works by classic and contemporary Cuban and Latin American authors, along with many authors from Africa, Asia, Europe and the United States.

Moviegoers could see in any neighborhood theater English, Italian, Spanish, Mexican, Brazilian, North American, Japanese, Polish, Hungarian, German from both sides of the wall, Czech and even Soviet films that depicted social visions and human problems. The Cuban cinema of that period included films on controversial matters such as *Ustedes tienen la palabra* (M.O.Gómez, 1973), *De cierta manera* (S. Gómez, 1973-77), *Retrato de Teresa* (P.Vega, 1979), *Cecilia* (H. Solás, 1981), *Techo de vidrio* (S. Giral, 1982) and *Lejanía* (J.Díaz, 1985).

At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, outstanding books of essays on art, literature and the history of Cuban culture were published by authors like Miguel Barnet, Alejo Carpentier, José Juan Arrom, Mirta Aguirre, Leonardo Acosta, Julio García Espinosa, Roberto Fdez. Retamar, Reynaldo González, Jorge Ibarra, Graziella Pogolotti, Enrique Sosa, Adelaida de Juan and Rine Leal.




Nevertheless, in general, social thought passed through a gray period. Readers in the decade of the 1960s had at their disposal a number of outstanding authors. Starting in 1971, the variety and richness of this inventory shrank considerably. In that decade, some worthy books were still being published. But between 1972 and 1984, and even in the second half of this decade, the great majority of the texts on social thought that flooded the bookstores in the fields of philosophy, economics, sociology, legal theory, universal history, linguistics and political science represented Marxism-Leninism of Eastern Europe. They ranged from a dictionary of economics for the manual worker to the oratorical arts of the USSR, and were not noted for presenting controversial themes about socialism. The book most used in many schools to explain the Cuban historical process in the second half of the twentieth century was *Cuba, el camino de la revolución* by Oleg Darushenkov.

Close ties in higher education were maintained with socialist countries until the end of socialism in Eastern Europe. The number of students sent to those countries grew, especially after 1975, such that graduates in the Soviet Union alone numbered more than a thousand per year starting in 1980-1981. In the five years of perestroika (1986-1991), 9,304 Cubans graduated in the Soviet Union, nearly half of all who completed their professional and technical studies there since the early 1960s. These figures do not include doctoral students, the military, schools of the party, or other specialties, nor students in other socialist countries.

Thus, beginning in 1982, and throughout that decade, the number of Cuban graduates each year in the USSR alone would exceed the total of graduates in the first fifteen years of academic relationships with the USSR: between 1961 and 1975, only 1,487 graduated, less than 7% of the total that completed their studies in the USSR. The aforementioned comments on exchange with the socialist community do not ignore the value that Cuban culture received from this relationship. Surely, no people of America has had such an intense and prolonged contact with Eastern Europe and the countries of the old USSR, nor today such a large number of people knowledgeable about the history, social reality, languages, ethnicities and cultures of those countries. The many Cubans who studied in those countries, in spite of the courses on scientific communism they had to take, had direct experience of these other incarnations of socialism. They were exposed to alternative interpretations of the canonical texts of Marxist-Leninism and became acquainted with the traditions, modes of thinking and national cultures of those peoples. The same happened with the immediate knowledge they picked up concerning the economic, social and cultural problems in Africa; and later, to a lesser degree, in Sandinista Nicaragua - although in general, cultural and intellectual contact with Latin America and the Caribbean was somewhat less.

The policy of the rectification (1985-1990), first, and the debate on the convening of the Fourth Party Congress later, opened a new phase in the exercise of criticism from below. These policies had a significant impact on culture and social thinking and influenced the intellectual and artistic renewal of the 1980s and 1990s. However, it is not possible to explain the controversies in the plastic arts, theater, the new narrative, and the debates on postmodernism, the validity of Marxism and the search for paradigms in social thought as mere products of those political and ideological phenomena. At the international level,



the Soviet policy of *perestroika* and at the national level, repercussions of Cases One and Two in 1989 (judicial processes against high officials of the Armed Forces and the Ministry of the Interior on charges of corruption linked to drug trafficking and damage to national security), with all their implications, only brought to a head forces that had been gathering in the previous years.

However, tensions among conflicting views on the role of culture and social thinking would not be completely overcome in the years of rectification, nor buried by the spirit of debate that came out of the Call of the Fourth Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC). These tensions surfaced in the contrasting reactions caused, in a span of just over two years, by films such as *Alicia en el pueblo de maravillas* (Díaz Torres, 1991), and *Fresa y chocolate* (*Strawberry and Chocolate*, Alea and Tabío, 1993). *Alicia* was judged "a work of hypercritical rhetoric," of "moral hopelessness, worthy of our worst enemies," with Orwellian tendencies that "encourage defeatism, despair and bitterness" (Pollo, 1991), in sum, "harmful to Cuban culture" (Callejas, 1991).

On the other hand, *Strawberry and Chocolate* would be appreciated, as "a transcendent film," a "richly abundant film," an exercise for reflection and debate "that breaks down the defenses of the intolerant, the cobwebs of the system," and "it persuades" (Pérez Betancourt, 1993). Its enthusiastic reception in Spain, Mexico, and the United States was applauded in the same Cuban press (see Pollo, 1995) that had condemned *Alicia* as a work "celebrated by our enemies and by those joining the band of cowards" (Pollo, 1991).


Leaving aside the differences in quality of the two films, these sharp differences cannot be explained by the critical image of Cuban society and policy that they project or by the forcefulness of their discourse, or even less by the gravity of the national situation at any one moment. In these contradictory manifestations, and in the eventual predominance of one or another concept, one finds an expression of the persistence of the fundamental discrepancies relating to the social and ideological function of art and intellectual production, throughout decades or half-decades.

With the crisis of the 1990s, however, this basic antagonism would take on less virulent forms, except in isolated cases, to the degree that the national condition was entering a new phase and the social fabric was undergoing a profound transformation. These changes would take the form of new phenomena, anxieties and dynamics that were latent in the 1980s and that would become more prominent under the impact of the Special Period of the 1990s.

### **What critical thought?**

The effects of crisis, the reform policies and the new market and tourism policies on society, emigration, religion and race, would be caught up in the vortex of Cuban thought and art. These currents would connect with the Cuban intellectual tradition of thinking critically about the times. A sample of the resurgence of this thought can be found in periodicals. Starting in 1995, during the recuperation from the special period crisis, more magazines than ever appeared (or reappeared) dealing with social and cultural themes.





*Casa de las Americas, Catauro, Caminos, Cine Cubano, Criterios, Debates Americanos, Del Caribe, El Caimán Barbudo, El Economista, Islas, Investigación Económica, La Gaceta, La Jiribilla, Marx Ahora, Movimiento, Revista de Ciencias Sociales, Revista de la Biblioteca Nacional, Revolución y Cultura, Tablas, Temas, Unión* and more than 60 registered electronic publications in the field of culture alone, reflect what can be considered in the world of ideas, an unprecedented era of revitalization and intellectual dissemination.


This is characterized by the concentration of discussion around such problems as nation and identity, globalization, the validity of Marxism and socialist ideas, the recovery of social thought, civil society and the history of the Republic, post modernism, gender studies, youth and the generations, religion, interracial relations, Cuban culture abroad, the new narrative, the theater as a space for the clash of ideas and other areas that today are open for debate.

No only the social sciences but also literature, the plastic arts and Cuban theater and film have treated these problems. As an example, take the stories and novels written and published in Cuba since the 1990s by young writers like Alberto Garrido or Mylene Fernández, older writers such as Leonardo Padura or Mirta Yáñez, the works of recognized playwrights who are represented today in the major theaters of the island. Or take the films that have won prizes and are shown in the movie houses, with directors from various generations like Fernando Pérez, Arturo Sotelo, Juan Carlos Tabío, Gerardo Chijona, Arturo Infante and Manuel Pérez. The central themes of many of these works would have been unthinkable twenty years ago. Among them are: the impact of the failure of socialism; issues concerning the war in Angola and the rafters; the recurrent presence of prostitution, drugs and other manifestations of a resurgent marginal world; and inclusions of tabooed themes like homosexuality and poverty.

Beyond the wave of issues addressed in the works of the late 1990s, contemporary Cuban literature and art have undertaken a controversial inquiry into the state of values and the decline in conditions of everyday existence. Diverse actors have participated during the course of this debate, which was also taken up by civil society, or promoted by groups within it. Included were not only writers and artists, publications, experts, professors and researchers, but community leaders, churches, professional associations, nongovernmental organisations, environmentalists, religious figures and ordinary citizens.

Despite this greater breadth and plurality of debate, there are still limitations of various kinds on Cuban social thought. These are related to the use of research results; the difficulty in obtaining information and data and to discuss sensitive aspects of some historical, economic and social problems with the argument that they are likely to be politically manipulated by the enemy or that they might raise resentments and division within our ideological unity. There is also the weak presence in the mass media of this discussion; the compartmentalization of certain themes of public interest; and the limited systematization and structuring of institutional spaces for discussion.

Furthermore, there also persists a cultural and psychosocial predisposition in civil society itself - including within the intellectual movement - that does not always facilitate the culture of dialogue and richness of exchange.




Replacement of a debate over ideas with the exercise of catharsis, personal reprobation, and the assignment of labels, the recitation of learned interpretations, the acceptance of self-censorship, ideologically rigid attachment to one or another symbol, the spirit of sect, the conditioned reflex of suspicion about themes that are ignored, or the automatic prejudice and mistrust toward 'bureaucrats' and 'bosses' – these are problems that go beyond the boundaries of social and cultural studies and spread over the most diverse spaces of society.

Art and social thought, as public goods, today have a responsibility to represent and analyze civil society, and contribute to its daily transformation; to criticize and discuss its values; to contribute to an informed, fundamental and authentic debate about its problems and to enrich its culture.

The function of art is not to offer didactic or exemplary formulas or to serve as mere a vehicle of propaganda. Those who would reduce the role of artists to that of an entertainer for the masses, convert them into a species of court jester - not to disparage jesters, since in Shakespeare the supposed buffoons are responsible for expressing the most important truths. Those who associate art with the contemplation of beauty and mere outbursts of feelings, contrasting it with a science that they identify with empirical evidence and the practical sense of things, seem to forget that art not only explores human intimacy but examines the deepest conflicts of society, including conflicts that do not reveal themselves in statistical data or opinion polls. Friedrich Engels found that he had learned more from reading Honoré de Balzac about "the complete history" of French society, including economic details, than from all the professional historians, economists and statisticians of that epoch put together (Engels, 1888).

Cultural and social thought are concentric fields, whose contributions are mainly intended for civil society, although they also must maintain a dialogue with the state and political institutions. It is a dialogue between one part of that civil society -a representative intellectual movement with its own legitimate sphere - and the rest of that society and its institutions. Supporting dialogue - to the extent that a dialogue facilitates the production of ideas or promotes knowledge of the most pressing social problems - does not imply organizing or planning it like the production of goods or services. Much less does it mean regulating and controlling dialogue with highly centralized or rigidly compartmentalized vertical mechanisms.

Disseminating knowledge is essential for the social and cultural development of debate, and also for the enrichment of social knowledge itself. This dissemination can contribute to the cultivation of a debate that is taking place in every way in various formal and informal spaces of civil society. Questions such as those of the market, social property, participation, consensus, racial discrimination and prejudice, sexual orientation, intergenerational differences, the crisis of moral and ideological values, the new migratory wave and its motivations, views on the capitalist lifestyle, the social impacts of tourism, freedom of expression, socialist democracy and pluralism, and many other equally complex and sensitive questions, are themes for discussion throughout the country, within and outside institutions.




Art and literature are addressing those themes in a most comprehensive way and with a greater impact than is social thought, although not with all the systematization and analytical power of the latter. But this qualitative difference in knowledge between art and social thought does not lie – as some think – in the possibility that the social sciences have of gathering and processing knowledge statistically. Nor do statistical tables, archives, facts and documents speak for themselves, as historians well know.

Politics is not studied only on the basis of speeches and declarations. Analysis of economic problems is not the same as describing tendencies nor summed up in balance sheets, tables and graphs. In its own way, the researcher, like the artist, needs vision, creativity and imagination to pose problems, hypotheses and interpretations. They have to master their methods and techniques, and they also need to have a broad culture, the same as the artist. Also, like the artist, they need a non-conformist attitude confronting the established and the acceptable, from which they must be ready to defend their truths with audacity and intelligence. Both have a responsibility and a social role to play as creators of culture. Without those things they can hardly do better than the medieval illuminators of sacred manuscripts.

On the other hand, establishing a border between social thought and social science takes us back to the nineteenth century positivism. Judged by such rigid criteria, would *Los factores humanos de la cubanidad*, *El imperialismo y la sociología*, *El 18 Brumario*, *La guerra civil en Francia*, *Del encausto a la sangre* or *La revolución pospuesta* be 'just' social or social thought? Today, where do you put philosophy, psychoanalysis, qualitative sociology, not to mention literary studies, art theory, or the theory of complexity? Do they constitute a supposedly 'hard' social science or a social thought lightly speculative and, therefore, more accurately 'soft'? To affirm that knowledge about the crucial issues of Cuban society can only come from a cloudy empiricism of techniques and formulas for the initiated which is supposedly objective and neutral, and that the results do not belong in a public debate, is equivalent to singling out from a body of critical knowledge a single discourse as valid as was thought in the Latin theology of the thirteenth century. The authorized discourse of the Scholastic period consisted of putting forth a doctrine to serve as the intellectual foundation of a faith. That cannot be the role of critical thought in socialism.

Moreover, incivility in debate is not limited to certain bureaucratic milieu. To examine deeply the impediments to dialogue requires that critical thinking must look itself in the mirror. Some intellectual debates are limited to a chorus of voices repeating the same ideas and responding stubbornly to those who disagree with them just as the most impenetrable institutional censor might. To distance oneself from catharsis and from its cultural and political futility, also means to give up that vision according to which each intellectual would have granted license to expound on any topic, including those they do not know well, obscuring something that was already clear to the Greeks of antiquity, namely, that opinion - *doxa* they would say - is not necessarily knowledge and much less is it critical thought. Naturally, without access to the sources it would be hard to cultivate enlightened opinions. In general, access depends on decisions that are not in the hands of researchers and is not regulated by clearly established norms, but rather by the arbitrary administrators of information.



In any case, in terms of dialogue, the basic question has more to do with the lack of a political culture that encourages dialogue. A genuine dialogue should not take as its premise that one of the two parties already possesses the truth. Nor does it take as a goal that of persuading the other, in a more or less patient manner, by bringing in the light of correct judgment and understanding of a revealed truth.

This pseudo-dialogue often gets bogged down in such responses as "you are right but this is not the time," "don't be naive", "it could be dangerous" or even with less courteous rejoinders as "that is a bourgeois concept" or "you must be careful with destabilizing judgments that encourage pessimism and desperation."

In Cuba, the development of a high culture has created a thinking civil society. The act of thinking implies a critical disposition, a capacity for spiritual and ideological creation of its own. These potentialities, and the new contradictions that are being confronted, are the vital mirror of a society and a culture that today sees itself capable of fully debating and deciding its present and its future.

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