Revolution in Education:
Learning Resistance in Cuban Schools

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Introduction

Growing up, I heard two distinct and conflicting narratives of Cuba. My mother used the first to console me when I cried as we walked the streets of Buenos Aires, usually crowded with children my age begging for a coin or two. She told me of a magical place where children were never hungry; they didn’t beg on the street for food. They could all read and write and were equal to one another. The image was powerful. And it stuck.

When I moved to Miami at ten years old, I began to hear a different story. Cuba was the home of the devil, Fidel Castro, where there was abject poverty and injustices abounded. People were miserable and had been indoctrinated to the point of inaction. They hated their government (whether they actually knew it or not) but had neither the tools nor the ability to remove the bearded revolutionary from his throne.

I eventually realized there was more nuance to these stories, but it was unclear where exactly reality fell. So I spent the Spring of 2014 in Havana, determined to find answers to this question.

I found that the reality of Cuban lives, like in most places, is more complicated and paradoxical than I could have predicted. Countless instances throughout my four months in the country informed my understanding of this reality, but there were a few moments that were of particular importance.

In March, I observed a first grade classroom at a school in La Lisa, a municipality of Havana. Though I was sitting in on a math class, the teacher began the lesson by asking what the date was. It was the 13th, marking the 57th anniversary of the student organization’s attack of Batista’s palace. A student quickly informed the class why this date was more important than
yesterday’s, adding that the attack had been made under the leadership of “our hero” Fidel against the “really bad guy,” Batista. This student was six years old; and yet, he already understood who the “good guy” was and what he stood for.

But story is not that simple. The conversations I had with other university students showed me that the impact of their education was more complex. Cubans of every age, in fact, were in my experience and conversations, extremely critical of the government, of Fidel and Raul, and of the revolution. Interestingly enough, I noticed they would often invoke revolutionary values or figures (Jose Martí especially, but Che Guevara, Camilo Cienfuegos and even Fidel Castro at times) to substantiate their criticism. They admired “our hero” Fidel, and still thought Batista was the “really bad guy” — but they didn’t blindly believe in the policies and practices of their government. Interestingly enough, it was often the values that the revolutionary morality and history imparted that were crucial to their understanding of injustice.

It is from this apparent contradiction that this thesis has come to life. Educational processes, I’ve discovered, are not characterized by a simple dichotomy between oppression and liberation, as Paulo Freire would have us believe. Unlike in the United States, Cuba’s history and revolutionary culture automatically inhibit indoctrination as an oppressive act. Revolutionary rhetoric, in its moral defiance of the status quo — its commitment to equality, social justice and resistance — does not inspire submissiveness. Still, the revolution does and has not automatically liberated, either.

This paper will seek to prove that education has perhaps unintentionally given Cubans the tools to resist their own government in seeking a more just society. The skills and values that
schooling has imparted have created communities of empowered individuals that are constantly negotiating these ingrained values with a reality that often seeks to negate them.

As the country continues to open up and Cubans find more and more ways of connecting with one another and the world around them, the tools for resistance the state has provided are likely to become more and more apparent and most importantly, more useful. Miami will no longer be able to say that Cubans are oppressed, indoctrinated, and morally opposed to the society that has been built. The picture, however, might not be as rosy as my mother once painted it to six year-old me.
Chapter 1

Literature Review

Since the dawn of mass formal education, scholars have incessantly probed for answers to the ultimate question in the field: What are the central purposes of schooling? In varying historical and cultural contexts, a slew of other concerns have surfaced, among them the following few: What is the relationship between the state and school? What roles should schools play in societies? How do we arrive at the outcomes we set out to achieve (in other words, what pedagogy will we apply)?

To understand some of these concepts and relationships, it is crucial to become acquainted with some of the literature that considers education and literacy as sources of potential empowerment. Given issues of control through education in Cuba, literature around hegemonic processes and value-formation in schools will be important as well. In the following paragraphs, these concepts and arguments will be discussed and put into conversation with one another, creating a framework for a later analysis of Cuban schools and the society that has emerged from the thousands of classrooms the revolution has built across the island.

Concepts and issues surrounding critical pedagogy will be the primary focus of this thesis, since the main concern in socialist, Cuban education is the purported potential of schooling to create a new society — a new man. Critical pedagogy evolved in the 1980s as an amalgamation of “radical principles, beliefs and practices” that saw education as a fundamental tool for a more just world.¹ Particularly important within this discipline are the works of Paulo Freire. Though the book precedes critical pedagogy as an organizing concept, Pedagogy of the

*Oppressed* makes the argument for a pedagogy that will unveil students’ oppression and help them transgress power structures to become liberated.

Freire perceives a world in which oppression necessitates dehumanization. By ultimately seeking to be “more fully human, sooner or later... [the oppressed] struggle against those who made them so.” The struggle towards humanization, however, cannot and will not begin with the oppressor — “it is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves can free their oppressors.” Once this is achieved, the new regime must continuously work against dehumanization. The oppressed can easily become the oppressors; bureaucracies, even when they exist in the name of liberation, cannot be the end-goal.

Education, according to Freire, has the capacity to both dehumanize and therefore oppress, but also to humanize and therefore liberate. The Brazilian scholar is particularly concerned with what he identifies as two opposing models of education. The first, the banking concept of education, recognizes teaching as an “act of depositing.” When the teacher merely transfers information to the student, it turns the student into a “receptacle,” waiting to be “filled.” Knowledge, then, “is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing,” rejecting inquiry or dialogue as modes of learning. By forcing a world view that cannot be debated or questioned, this kind of education forces a passive role on students, who continue to “adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them.” This ensures that the oppressors continue to

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3 Ibid., 38.
4 Ibid., 39.
5 Ibid., 53.
6 Ibid., 54.
oppress — their “tranquility rests on how well people fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it.” The depositing of knowledge, after all, precludes critical thinking.⁷

Though these students may eventually recognize their oppression without any guidance, Freire makes the argument that it is the state, school and more specifically the teacher’s job to provide a path towards liberation. The second model of teaching, the problem-posing method, has several components and serves this end. Unlike the banking model of education, in which the teacher issues communiqués, problem-posing education is one in which the teacher communicates.⁸ Freire challenges the teacher-student relationship by proposing that teachers become teacher-students and students become student-teachers. Through dialogue, he argues, “they become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow,” and issues of authority become naught.⁹ In his model, teachers must constantly revise content based on their students such that there is a “constant unveiling of reality.” As Freire aptly puts it, problem-posing education is education “as the practice of freedom,” in which consciousness and critical thinking are constantly being developed.¹⁰

Freire issues caution as he presents his pedagogical theory; he warns revolutionaries against believing that simply depositing “liberationist” rhetoric in students will liberate them. Authentic liberation, he says “is not another deposit to be made in men. Liberation is a praxis.”¹¹

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⁷ Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 57.
⁸ Ibid., 60.
⁹ Ibid., 61
¹⁰ Ibid., 62
¹¹ Ibid., 60.
This is particularly important in the case of revolutionary Cuba, whose critics have accused the
government of indoctrinating its citizens on more than one occasion.

The relationship between the state and students is more complicated than Freire may
suggest, though. He does not seem to acknowledge that the state exists as an entity with its own
interests, perhaps different than those of its people. As Michael Apple tells us, formal schooling
is largely and generally controlled by a state with its own agenda — so much so that schools are
at the center of “crucial struggles over the meaning of democracy, over definitions of legitimate
authority and culture, and over who should benefit the most from government policies and
practices.” In fact, the very “notions of rights and duties” are “meant to introduce [the child]
into civil society and the life of the State,” according to Antonio Gramsci. Schools are informed
by the state’s process to build hegemony, or the “spontaneous consent given by the great masses
of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental
group.”

To Freire’s credit, it’s important to note that this control is neither absolute nor static, and
educational institutions may serve as spaces “in which groups with major grievances over culture
and politics struggle for both recognition and redistribution.” Hegemony “is not only the key to
bourgeois power; equally it is the master concept for proletariat power.” As such, it is

12 Michael Apple, “The State and the Politics of Knowledge,” in *The State and the Politics of Knowledge* (New
16 Mark Haugaard, “Power and Hegemony in Social Theory” in *Hegemony and Power: Consensus and Coercion in
“constantly having to be built and rebuilt; it is contested and negotiated.” The key facilitator of hegemonic construction, according to Gramsci, is ideology, whose strength is “located in the capacity of a set of ideas and consciousness to tie together divergent interests into a singular hegemonic interpretative horizon... ideology is tied to leadership.” Schools are, in this very sense, one of the primary vehicles through which to construct a shared ideology and morality.

It is through the educational process, then, that official knowledge is constructed — knowledge is given worth and legitimacy within a society through the classroom. Official knowledge results as a set of “conflicts and compromises both within the state and between the state and civil society,” and often helps us identify communities that have no voice or power and those that do. According to Apple, it is for this reason that “curriculum talk is power talk.” With this official knowledge are also prescribed roles for people to play — “subject positions that embody identities for people.” That is, schooling may intend to create individuals as part of a collective, individual consumers, democratic citizens, etc.

According to William Roseberry, official knowledge is an especially important concept in the context of subaltern resistance. In his analysis, he reinforces Gramsci’s suggestion that subaltern groups do not remain passive, captured, immobilized through the hegemonic process. Actually, the relationship between the ruling and subaltern groups is “characterized by

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18 Haugaard, “Power and Hegemony...,” 47.
20 Ibid., 12.
contention, struggle, and argument”21 within a discursive framework created by the state. Roseberry argues that the “ways in which the words, images, symbols, forms, organizations, institutions, and movements used by subordinate populations to talk about, understand, confront, accommodate themselves to, or resist their domination are shaped by the process of domination itself.” What hegemony creates is therefore not a shared ideology through which consent is achieved, but a framework through which one can live, talk and act upon “social orders characterized by domination.”22 What Roseberry proposes and what will be central to this paper, is that ruling groups establish a framework through which consent and struggle may simultaneously happen. The state’s hegemonic process provides a language and an official base of knowledge from which to base resistance.

This knowledge and language varies with each state, particularly with regard to the proposed political, social and economic objectives of schooling. It is especially influenced by the ideological foundations of the state, which are “a crucial construct for understanding how meaning is produced, transformed, and consumed by individuals and social groups,” according to critical pedagogue Henry Giroux.23 Schools are crucial to this process, for they “produce social formations... but at the same time contain contradictory pluralities that generate possibilities for both mediation and the contestation of dominant ideologies and practices. In effect, the school is neither an all-encompassing foothold of domination nor a locus of revolution; thus, it contains ideological and material spaces for the development of radical pedagogies... it is a sphere that must be seriously considered as a site for creating a critical discourse around the forms a democratic society might take.”24

22 Ibid., 361.
24 Ibid., 115-6.
Giroux, unlike this thesis, places resistance in the hands of the radical educator, though. What makes Cuba different from other countries and what therefore makes critical pedagogy less applicable is that its revolutionary language and base of knowledge — the revolutionary ideology — are more obviously amenable to resistance. It may be easier, for this reason, to ‘contest dominant ideologies’ without the work of a subversive teacher ally or a liberationist state.

Cuba’s focus on education also sets it apart from other countries. The very way in which the Literacy Campaign of 1961 was framed is crucial to understand the absolute and real power that was invested in education (of all kinds) by the Cuban state. Literacy in general was deemed the solution to many of the country’s problems. Illiteracy, after all, was the “product of underdevelopment, provoked by imperialist interventions... a powerful enemy that we must defeat.”25 As such, a lot of energy and resources were invested in schooling. But literacy has never been neutral. Being able to engage in “literary practices... involves contests over meanings, definitions, and boundaries and struggles for control of the literacy agenda.”26 Giving people the power to read does not exclusively help craft national consciousness or encourage economic development.27 Literacy is more powerful than that. It is not a mere skill, but rather a “vehicle for critical reason... a mode of thought and assemblage of skills that allow individuals to break with the predefined.”28

It is with these conceptions of schooling, pedagogy, and education in general that we now move towards the history of Cuba’s revolutionary struggles and the establishment of an educational system that, though changed, has similar intentions today than in 1959.
Chapter 2

A History of Cuban Education: Criticisms and Praises

Prior to the guerrilla’s revolutionary triumph in 1959, the state of Cuban education was deficient, even in the context of Latin American underdevelopment. Cuba under Fulgencio Batista, who ruled from 1933 until the revolution, shows ample evidence of the school system’s inadequacy before the revolution sought to change educational paradigms.

Under Batista, schooling was characterized by the “lack of leadership, corruption, and structural obstacles,” that reigned the government at large. In the early 1950s, only half of primary-school age children were enrolled in school. In poorer communities, many of which were concentrated in rural areas, enrollment was even lower. For the rest of Latin America the average school enrollment was 64 percent, placing Cuba near the bottom in educational attainment. In fact, almost twenty-five percent of the entire population was illiterate before the revolution triumphed.

Even fewer Cubans had access to education beyond basic literacy, though. Sixty percent never made it past the third grade, and only 3.5 percent graduated from high school. The lack of resources was often a deterrent. For instance, while in 1959 there were 732,000 children of school age in rural areas, available resources could only serve 279,000 students — a mere 38 percent. In a study of rural Cuba, Lowry Nelson noted that “In some places there are school buildings, but no teachers; in other places there are teachers, but no school buildings... little if

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any progress has been made since 1907 in providing school opportunities for the nation’s children.”

In fact, Batista’s dictatorship, and more specifically his educational policies “challenged any hope of considering education as a channel for social mobility.” As Cuban scholar Felipe de Jesús Pérez Cruz says, educational activists understood that the lack of attention and importance placed on alphabetization and education at large were based on principles of domination and hegemonic control.

Despite wide-ranging criticisms of the revolution and, more specifically, its educational policies, schooling under Castro’s new Cuba took a different approach, especially in the first few years. The National Literacy Campaign reversed literacy patterns within a few years. By September of 1959, 844 literacy centers had been opened, 19,075 Cubans had become literate and 2,832 were new literacy teachers. 1961 became the “Year of Education.” By December, 96.1 percent of the population had achieved a first-grade reading level — the highest in Latin America and among the highest in the world.

The Literacy Campaign, like the educational programs and policies that followed, was not a neutral or objective undertaking, nor was that ever the stated intention. The revolution was attempting to “create a new rational, emotional, and ideological world.” Education would be imbued with value — schools would impart a collective spirit, egalitarianism, self-sacrifice,

32 As cited in Leiner, “Cuba’s Schools,” 446.
35 Mark Abendroth, Rebel Literacy: Cuba’s National Literacy Campaign and Critical Global Citizenship (Duluth, MN: Litwin Books, 2009), 67.
36 Leiner, “Cuba’s Schools,” 447.
patriotism, internationalism, and conciencia, or conscience-building. In other words, education was the vehicle through which Che’s New Man would be created. Though the relationship between intention, rhetoric and reality has not been entirely clear, Cuban education has never purported neutrality. The morals and values that the government thinks students should learn have always been made explicit, unlike in other systems, where these are imparted through the hidden curriculum or individual teacher.

Still, the space for criticism was and still is limited. Ethnographer Denise Blum notes that creating this New Man and therefore new society “was driven by a moral imperative that infused politics with idealism and intensity,” also known as the politics of passion. By creating a “hyperattachment to emotionally charged myths and symbols,” Cuban education was able to create a static dichotomy — one was (and still is) either for or against the revolution. There is no medium. The development of consciousness would have to create a moral conviction that “allowed no deviation; one had to be willing to live, work, and die for la patria, the fatherland, and for political ideals.” Given that material incentives would not exist in this newly socialist country, it was imperative to form a revolutionary consciousness that would propel development. As such, there has been little room for dissent in public, institutional spaces, like schools — any kind of objection, after all, could become a threat to the state under the dichotomous world the revolution and its engineers have created. Even “revolutionary” bloggers,

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37 Denise Blum, Cuban Youth and Revolutionary Values: Educating the New Socialist Citizen (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 22.
38 Ibid.
those who stand alongside the revolution and Fidel, have had their blogs shut down or engaged in self-censorship — toned down their criticism — for this reason.39

It is also for this reason that the Cuban education system has garnered so much negative attention, particularly from abroad. In an analysis conducted by The Endowment for Cuban American studies, Cuban education was characterized for its power to “catapult a new generation to service the revolutionary cause.”40 This they named “Castro’s indoctrination.” Even math curricula employ revolutionary rhetoric. Schools in Cuba, it has been said, are a “medium for propaganda of marxist ideas.”41

It’s true that even the earliest educative efforts were imbued with revolutionary and marxist rhetoric. One of the first sections of the manual for the literacy workers was, in fact, titled “themes for an introduction to the revolution.” It begins by explaining that “countries need a revolution to develop,” — that only “through a revolution will nations be able to end foreign domination and establish a sovereign government.”42 The manual goes on to present the issues the revolution concerned itself with — it explains that Fidel is the supreme leader, and describes everything from cooperatives to Cuba’s exploitation under previous governments, “imperialism,” and racial relations — in order for the literacy worker to present these concepts to the marginal communities the movement was trying to reach. Some of the first vocabulary words taught were anti-imperialist, cooperative and nation.43


41 Ibid., 31-1.

42 Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, Alfabeticemos, 23.

43 Ibid., 79-97.
Since the literacy campaign, Cuban curricula have expressed similarly subjective sentiments as fact. But unlike in the United States and many other “democratic” nations, the Cuban government is explicit about the fact that education is “an instrument of the state.” Since its inception, Castro was clear that the “revolution could not occur without proper education.” The literacy campaign proved this much. As such, schooling has and continues to “explicitly serve the revolution.” It is clear, for this reason, why accusations of indoctrination have been rampant throughout the 56 years Castro has been in power, continuously attempting to consolidate and institutionalize the revolution in Cuba.

But using schools to serve political purposes is hardly innovative. What differentiates the Cuban education system most from others is the spheres of influence it permeates. Unlike in other countries, where families are identified as crucial actors in children’s success, Cuban schools share “responsibility for a child’s academic and social progress, and if the school cannot “solve” a problem, municipality personnel enter the discussion.” This means that school administrators and teachers keep track of family “difficulties,” that families must “respond to school queries and concerns.” Students go to school from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon and have one teacher from first through sixth grade. The school has equal responsibility for a child’s academic and social progress as the parent of that child. Moreover, each child must go to a public school at least until the ninth grade, where curricula are

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44 Blum, Cuban Youth, 6.
45 Ibid., emphasis mine.
determined nationally. These factors create incredibly equitable academic achievement. So while “Cubans have far fewer social and economic choices and far less political and individual freedom” than they would elsewhere, they “have a far more broad-based opportunity to be highly educated.”

Of course, this thesis does not seek to justify the explicitness of the “indoctrination” previously discussed or the lack of space for criticism around matters concerning the revolution and the current government. Far from it, I am a Freirian scholar, steadfast in my opinion that schools should be spaces where critical thinking is the order of the day, every day. However, in the following sections I will argue that despite this often valid criticism, the Cuban government has inadvertently given its people the tools to be critical — not submissive. Through education, Cubans have gained the skills, learned the values and internalized the rhetoric necessary to resist the government and its policies. Far from creating the indoctrinated, passive beings Cuban Americans would like us to imagine, the revolution has produced an empowered, thoughtful populace who is not only able to understand and criticize the policies and practices of the government, but do on a regular basis in spaces institutional and private alike.

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49 Ibid., 42
Chapter 3

Literacy as Empowerment

Despite its many criticisms, the Cuban education model has undoubtedly achieved one feat many more developed countries have not — close to 100 percent literacy. Compared to the rest of Latin America, where the average is 86 percent, Cuba ranks amongst the highest in the continent. This is in part due to the fact that every Cuban person has access to the exact same level of schooling, regardless of race, sex, religion, geographical location or social background. Because elementary and secondary education in Cuba also functions under one national curriculum, the government has ensured that each student has access to the same body of knowledge and skills. The fact that schooling is mandatory, free and equal has ensured a highly literate and educated populace, despite demographic differences across the island.

Literacy in the Cuban context is particularly important when considering its pre-revolutionary past. Decreasing spaces in which people could “communicate with one another,” or access “information about events in other regions of the country” was important for a government like Batista’s to maintain stability. Illiteracy has been “associated with a culture of silence and a lack of protest” in Cuba, like in the United States’ slave-ridden South. As such, efforts to increase access to schooling were limited, and illiteracy rates hovered above 25 percent.

51 Ibid., 127
The revolution, at the very least, reversed these patterns by focusing on literacy from day one. Given that education was a primary concern in building a more just society, establishing schools, training teachers and imparting literacy skills was crucial. This intense focus on education created a more powerful society too, though. As this section will argue, literacy is, after all, an inherently emancipatory act.

Though debates about the power of literacy are continuous, it has been argued that oral language “inclines us to adherence to authority, received wisdom, and common sense,” whereas “literacy, by providing alternate accounts, provokes and sustains a skeptical attitude to authority and a greater individuality.” Literacy can be empowering “especially when it works in conjunction with other changes.” In Cuba, the revolution’s numerous social initiatives made literacy a particularly empowering phenomenon for this reason. Reading and writing, for instance, was necessary in the process of land reorganization. Many peasants could not even sign their names prior to the 1961 Literacy Campaign.

Particularly since this campaign, “literacy has been seen as a process of consciousness-raising aimed at human liberation” universally. Though they hailed the government as the ultimate savior, literacy workers also helped peasants understand oppression and their own previously marginal status. The manual for these workers reads, “illiteracy, the product of underdevelopment, provoked by imperialist interventions and indirectly produced by the country’s economic and political lag, is a powerful enemy we must overcome... we will unite to


57 Armove and Graff, “National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Lessons” 203.
liberate our country from this internal enemy and achieve, with its liquidation, complete liberty and incorruptible unity."\(^{58}\)

Despite this attempt at ideological unity, Literacy Campaigns, in Cuba and elsewhere, have had relatively uncontrollable results. It's important to recognize that one cannot read revolutionary slogans without also being able to read counter-revolutionary pamphlets. While the literacy campaign offered a single solution to the injustices and oppression it brought to light — that is, the revolution — it also empowered individuals in an irrevocable way. Literacy, after all, "cannot be reduced to behavioral conditioning. It endows people with skills that they can (although do not always) use to receive and emit messages of an almost infinite range, a range that in any event escapes the control of those who imparted literacy."\(^{59}\)

Literacy is inherently empowering in that it "suggests a state of being and a set of capabilities through which the individual is able to utilize the interior world of self to act upon and interact with the exterior structures of the world around him in order to make sense of self and other."\(^{60}\) As Patrick L. Courts so beautifully puts it,

"Language, the possibility of making meaning, is the essence of being human. It is at the center of individual empowerment. Through it, instead of simply being subject to the structures and activities that define the different societal system, one interacts with and participated in the creation of the system. Through it, one engages in the continual, active process of Being. Without it, one is simply another brick in the wall surrounding one’s self."\(^{61}\)

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\(^{58}\) Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, *Alfabeticemos*, 5.

\(^{59}\) As cited in Armore and Graff, "National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Lessons," 204.


\(^{61}\) Ibid. 137
Imparting literacy, then, is not just an act of hegemonic construction, but an innately liberatory act through which individuals are able to create the world around them. There is a strong connection “between access to literacy and social participation.”

It’s true that literacy as “a necessary precursor to... economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility,” has been “invested with immeasurable and indeed almost ineffable qualities.” Literacy campaigns are not enough to achieve total empowerment, as there is a “need for a complimentarity of efforts between formal school systems and out-of-school programs for adults as well for the young... in providing an infrastructure of opportunities to acquire and practice literacy skills.” However, Cuba’s literacy efforts did not end with the basic skills the Literacy Campaign afforded — the country did, indeed, recognize the power of the campaign alongside its limits. The campaign was followed by the battles for third, sixth and ninth grade levels of literacy — by a continuous focus on schooling in general. Moreover, these educational policies have occurred alongside campaigns around health, employment, nourishment and housing.

As the next section will argue, the revolution’s values have also pushed Cubans to aptly use their literacy skills to be subversive. The emergence of the Cuban blogosphere is crucial to understand modern adaptations of literacy as resistance. The communities of bloggers and the collective criticism that the Internet has enabled is an indirect result of the continued focus on literacy by the Cuban government. The internet, in many ways, has afforded Cubans’ resistance

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64 Ibid., 107.
65 Ibid., 106.
visibility both within and outside the island. While criticism has always existed, “media
technologies open up new social, economic, and political opportunities for Cubans by advancing
the speed of communication, expanding its scope, and increasing its forms.”

Cuban bloggers have “gradually pushed the limits of critical debate beyond relatively
safe private and cyberspaces into more risky public spaces.” Because media was previously
within the exclusive purview of the state, blogging has emerged as a form of “citizen
journalism,” through which Cubans are able to express disagreement. Yoani Sanchez, one of the
most famous dissident Cuban bloggers (especially well-liked in the United States) launched her
blog, Generación Y, in April of 2007. Her goal was to “expand the space for serious, respectful,
and pluralistic debate within Cuba” alongside several other bloggers who belong to a cyber-
community now known as Voces Cubanas, or Cuban voices.

Voces Cubanas is one of many blogger communities that have convened around varying
degrees of support for the government and revolution. Still, they are each able to undermine “the
power of traditional media” in an unprecedented way. While “the street’ may still belong to
Fidel... it is much less clear who Cuban cyberspace belongs to, if anyone,” giving a platform to
Cubans with voices but few means to share them. By creating a space for expression and
debate (which is constant amongst bloggers), the internet has become the medium through which
literacy is aptly used to publicly criticize the state.

66 Cristina Venegas, Digital Dilemmas: The State, the Individual and Digital Media in Cuba (New Brunswick, NJ:
Rutgers University Press, 2010), 74.
67 Ted A. Henken and Sjamme van de Voort, “From Cyberspace to Public Space? The Emergent Blogosphere and
68 Henken and van de Voort, “From Cyberspace...,” 102.
69 Ibid., 106.
Similarly, musicians (and particularly rappers) have used their lyrics to create an alternate vision for Cuba by criticizing government policies and practices. Cuban hip-hop has been read as a response to “social change and crisis in the last two decades.”\textsuperscript{70} Los Aldeanos, a rapping duo from Havana, are arguably the best example of “radical opposition to the socialist state in the cultural public sphere.”\textsuperscript{71} Though Los Aldeanos by no means stand alone, they show how “Cuban popular music has challenged dominant state ideology” through their honest, subversive lyrics.\textsuperscript{72}

Through the blogosphere and underground music scene, Cubans have, to echo Courts, appropriated literacy to reimagine their worlds.\textsuperscript{73} They are empowered through this continuously nurtured literacy to criticize, resist and challenge the revolution, despite the policies’ original intentions.

For those that have not yet challenged the revolution through the written word, reading blogs can inform their conceptions and analysis of the Cuban reality. Though access to internet is limited, blog posts travel through USBs, passing from the hands of those with access to those without throughout the country. Similarly, music that is officially censored, or hails from bands in exile, travels through flash drives, often originating from the computers of the musicians themselves. Using the revolutionary value of collectivism (a matter that will be discussed further) Cubans have given each other access to works of resistance, each using the power imbued in literacy — a product of the revolution itself.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{73} Courts, Literacy and Empowerment, 137.
Chapter 4

Revolutionary Rhetoric

Literacy is not the only tool the government has given the Cuban people to resist. But it is a skill that forms the very basis of almost all acts of resistance.

In his book *She Would Not Be Moved*, Herbert Kohl analyzes the way in which Rosa Park’s story is told in public school classrooms across the U.S. He argues that by presenting her as a poor, old seamstress who was just “too tired” to move to the back of the bus one day, the narrative’s receptors are being pacified. Instead of empowering students by creating “the possibility of every child identifying her- or himself as... someone who can make justice happen,” schools frame the story as an isolated and coincidental incident, where in reality, it was an intentional, organized act, with hundreds of conscious actors.74

The story of the Cuban revolution is less amenable to passivity. Cuban citizens are *revolutionaries* first. This identity has been constructed through schools in accordance with Che Guevara’s vision of *conciencia*. The word means more than what “is implied by the English translation of ‘consciousness’ or ‘awareness.’ Conciencia was created... with explicit political goals and participation in revolutionary activities; it involved a commitment to action.”75 Che’s New (socialist) Man “would be consumed with passion for the nation and the revolution.”76 But a revolution is, by definition, the antithesis of passivity or stability. Fostering a “revolutionary personality,” or revolutionary values, as is the objective of education in Cuba,77 cannot create submissive beings who are accommodating of the status quo. Unlike Rosa Parks’ story, the

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75 Blum, *Cuban Youth*, 5. Emphasis mine.
76 Ibid., 22
77 Ibid., 24
rhetoric of the revolution is itself imbued with so much power, passion, and defiance, that it’s impossible to create perfectly obedient revolutionaries. Obedience and revolution are indeed incompatible concepts.

Particularly telling is the fact that education seeks to create revolutionary citizens, and not citizens of the Revolution. Though the Cuban Revolution is an institutionalized phenomenon, revolution (with a lower-case “r”) is a never-ending process. In fact, the Cuban state depends on “convincing people that political victory in itself does not signify the success of the revolution.” 

Institutionalization, which “entails the simultaneous dismantling of whatever institutions remain from the old regime and their replacement or reconfiguration,” is not the same thing as consolidation, which involves citizens’ embrace of “the social revolutionary project, its essence or core.”

Since 1959, the Cuban state has been working to win “the people’s soul,” and people have sought “to realize the visions that brought many of them to the struggle.” As Eric Selbin notes,

“success is measured by the degree to which the population adopts the core of the social revolutionary project not simply in words but in deeds. Consolidation, then, is related to people’s perceptions of the conditions of their everyday lives and of their relationships with each other, with the new government, even with the revolutionary process itself. At this stage, the factors central to consolidation are trust, opportunity, and vision of the future, which are bound together by an underlying sense of empowerment.”

This empowerment, spearheaded through teaching revolutionary values, is imparted in many ways beyond textbooks and curricula, though these are crucial as well. “Pioneer

79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 21.
organizations” are central to life in Cuban schools, providing an “interface that diminishes the authoritarian distance that usually exists between students and teachers.” The Pioneers form a type of student government association (to which every Cuban student belongs) that organizes school functions and helps monitor classrooms. A tool for socialization, they are used as pipelines for the selective state group, the Young Communist Union (Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas), which oversees mass youth organization. Their slogan, and by default, the slogans painted on many school walls across the country is Seremos como el Che! or “We will be like Che!” During morning assemblies, in fact, students often “incant their desire to ‘be like Che’, with commitment and self-sacrifice.” If the histories of Che, Fidel, Camilo Cienfuegos, José Martí or the revolution in general were not being imparted in schools, this slogan could be stripped of its inherently empowering value. Because, however, the country’s revolutionary history is constantly being taught, the situation begs the following question: How can the government spur children to “be like Che,” fully aware of his values, ideology, history, and also passively accept the status quo?

The effect of revolutionary symbols in schooling

Before understanding how schooling informs resistance, it is important to explore the effects of these theoretically powerful symbols on the moral consciousness of Cubans. In other words, how effective has education been at inculcating the values of the revolution in its citizens?

81 Blum, Cuban Youth, 152.
82 Ibid., 152
First we should acknowledge that, as Denise Blum notes, the ideology of the revolution did not need to rely on “literal truth” to be successful. As she says,

“the ‘battle’ against illiteracy, the formation of the ‘New Man,’ and other symbolic language of the revolution, according to Clifford Geertz (1964), should not be discounted on the grounds that these terms and slogans are not scientific. Rather, metaphors and symbols should be taken seriously and considered successful insofar as they multiply meanings and enlarge understanding for their intended audiences.”

This is important to the Cuban context — the myths and images of Che, Martí or even the revolution itself create value and meaning, which in turn informs Cubans’ understanding of the world. Though Cubans may not explicitly refer to these images, they constantly allude to the values and morality Che, Martí and the revolution explicitly represent.

In his study of revolutionary morality in education, Antoni Kapcia explains that these symbols have been especially important following the economic and political transformations of the Special Period. Because Cuban youth took ownership over the revolution in its early stages, “there was no sense of adolescent dissidence” in the 1960s and 70s. By the 1980s, however, there were “dangerously rising expectations (from a generation unused to austerity), alongside a frustration at continuing economic constraints and growing mediocrity.” By the 1990s, the contradiction between revolutionary values and reality was even greater.

The myths of Guevara and Martí became crucial tools for the government to strengthen moral commitment to the revolution in schools. A study conducted in 1997-98 found that, indeed, young people were increasingly identifying with Che Guevara, “a young rebel.” This presented the “opportunity to parade both their ‘belonging’ and their distinctiveness, to be both

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84 Ibid., 44
revolutionary [in the institutional sense] and dissenting. In other words, as the government created a curriculum to “solidify civic understanding and promote political solidarity in the revolution” through the “major economic and political transitions” of the 1990s, it also introduced, to a much greater and powerful degree, the mythical, revolutionary (in the truest and most subversive sense of the word) figure of Che, who would give students a language for resistance. While it created an attractive opportunity to belong, the state simultaneously allowed an effective means through which to dissent.

In her ethnographical study, Blum similarly notes the effectiveness of Cuban education (both for students and future teachers) in creating revolutionary consciousness. Particularly interesting is the case of the teacher, Lizabet, whose classroom she observed. Lizabet was vocal in her disapproval of Cubans who were members of the state Communist party for ‘selling out’ and receiving certain privileges, while identifying as a true revolutionary herself. Her education was internalized in such a way that it even rejected state ‘models’ to remain congruous with her personal conception of revolutionary morality. She became a teacher, in fact, in her personal vendetta against the state, who failed to convict the soldiers that drunkenly killed her son while riding their army jeep. Though she shut down discussion that veered away from official rhetoric, she was also confident in her assertion that teaching civics would be the “only way to make the world a better place.” As a teacher, she would be able to impart notions of social justice — civic “rights and duties” — through the language of the state.

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87 Blum, Cuban Youth..., 129.
88 Blum, Cuban Youth..., 130.
89 Ibid., 160.
90 Ibid.
The results of Blum’s student surveys at the end of her observations were equally as revealing. She asked two groups of students what the three most important values were for a person to develop. In one class, the teacher prompted the students with possible responses: laboriousness, anti-imperialism, solidarity, honor, honesty, patriotism and responsibility. 72 percent considered honesty to be the most important value, 56 percent thought honor was most important, 37 percent answered laboriousness and 36 percent answered responsibility. The class that had not been prompted with answers, however, answered very similarly. Friendship and companionship (similar to solidarity) and honesty were the most important values, and were selected by almost half of the students. Though of course this does not alone suffice as proof, it is evident that students have, to a certain degree, internalized the values the revolution preaches in classrooms.

In a quest to produce revolutionary citizens, the Pioneer organization also provides opportunities for students to take on socially useful work and assume ownership over their own communities and schools. In a peer assessment called “la autocritica,” Blum notes that students are asked to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses as Pioneers, helping them “develop a keen sense of who they [are]... when measured against the revolutionary ideal.” This practice prepares students for “public critique” — by constantly asking them to think about the steps they need to take to become Che’s new, revolutionary man, schools compel Cubans to instinctively measure one another (and themselves) using the values they are learning in school.

91 Ibid., 137.
92 Ibid., 138.
93 Ibid., 158.
Blum acknowledges that there is a constant negotiation of these values, especially as a “political formula was adopted involving capitalist measures that undermined the very principles on which socialism stood.” Cubans have not internalized these values without adjusting them to fit their basic needs. In other words, Cubans have had to betray or reformulate revolutionary values to live through their economic reality— they have had to purchase goods in the black market and take jobs in the private sector and will continue to do so.

Still, Blum argues that this does not mean that Cuban education has been ineffective at inculcating revolutionary values. Quite the opposite, the revolution continues to inform the creation and development of personal networks of family and friends. As contradictions between the public (official rhetoric) and the private (the daily lives and experiences of Cubans) grow, young people insist on infusing “Cuban socialism with real meaning, not empty phrases.” The demise of socialism has merely created personal and private contradictions, whereby Cubans are constantly having to negotiate between their learned morality and survival.

It is clear, then, that the objectives of state education have in part been fulfilled. Whether it was ever the intent of the government to empower individuals — as opposed to control or contain — is unclear. But the indoctrination that so many have criticized for achieving the latter, may have had the effects of the former. Rhetoric around the revolution and its heroes created and continues to create the tools for Cubans to resist the state. Symbols like Che (of which there are many in the revolution) empower individuals to take their understandings of social justice, also informed by the revolution, and criticize the state in the language it has itself created.

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94 Ibid., 209.
95 Blum, Cuban Youth..., 214.
96 Ibid., 208.
Roseberry would argue that, in this regard, Cuba has successfully created a discursive framework “for living through, talking about and acting upon social orders characterized by domination.” In other words, schools have created a language that allows Cubans to resist the state in meaningful ways. To use Gramscian terms, the Cuban state has adequately constructed and preserved a shared ideology, or a “set of ideas and consciousness” that “tie together divergent interests.” Still, it has, by no means, created obedient and loyal citizens, as critics often suggest.

This has been especially apparent since the 1990s, or the Special Period, as the government began to, in many ways, co-opt revolutionary values to keep the economy afloat (they created the tourism industry, reduced funding for social programs, etc.). Their purported ideology, in and outside of schools, however, never changed — again, the private and public began to dramatically differ. This means that young people are still being educated around the revolutionary morality of the 60s, despite the evolution of Cuban reality. The more these values, morals, ideologies are set aside in practice, the more people have questioned state authority by evoking the revolution as a model for social justice. Blog posts and hip-hop lyrics are two of the main examples through which we can see that resistance to the state is based on revolutionary values and language as they are taught in schools. My own experiences in Havana, which will be discussed later, also point in a similar direction. As Blum says, the “concepts and values of the revolution have not disappeared, but have been reconfigured to better answer societal needs” — reconfigured to challenge an ever-changing state.

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98 Haugaard, “Power and Hegemony in Social Theory,” 47.
99 Blum, Cuban Youth. . . 141.
The Cuban Blogosphere

It must be acknowledged that "however low the percentage of Cubans officially connected to the Internet, the Internet is clearly connected to Cuban society, even as the government attempts to manage its visibility."\textsuperscript{100} Bloggers have made use of the Internet to "make their voices heard." In her study of Cuban bloggers and civil society, Renee Naomi Timberlake points out that,

"While governments adhering to principles of participatory democracy have pre-Internet modes of communication with the plebian masses, the Internet has facilitated those interactions and where such interactions are limited or non-existent, the Internet has provided a public space more embracive than the political landscape on the ground. The Internet has changed the face of social and political dynamics affecting the ways in which hegemonic discourse is constructed and reconstructed. It is another public space where minds can meet, debate, grow, reject, etc."\textsuperscript{101}

Elaine Diaz is one of the most recognized bloggers in Cuba, and has a following both in and outside of the country. In one of our conversations, she told me that her posts often travel via flash drive and reach more Cubans than those who have access to the Internet. Like many other bloggers, she is extremely critical of the state and their evolving policies.

In one of her posts, titled \textit{The truth is revolutionary}, she denounces the state media for lying and simplifying Cuban realities, and state officials for stealing where their power allows it. She says, "the truth is revolutionary when its used to denounce the abuses and spoliations that the powerful commit against the weak... the truth is revolutionary when it is exercised as opportune criticism and helps point to the mistakes of projects that seek a better world."\textsuperscript{102} She essentially uses honesty as a revolutionary value to question the actions of the state in an explicit

\textsuperscript{100} Cristina Venegas, \textit{Digital Dilemmas}, 68.
manner — it’s not just truth, but revolutionary truth, like the one Che and Fidel claimed to offer people that had been oppressed under the Batista regime. In a particularly revealing instance, she says that “shameful situations have causes and responsible entities, origin, agents, victims, powerless witnesses and tolerant witnesses. Others — and we will see who those are — will have the duty to behave like revolutionaries; to not hide the truth, with which the wrongdoer protects himself.” In her criticism, she identifies herself as one who will protect the revolution against the Revolutionary state, guilty of betraying the revolution’s project, which ‘seeks a better world.’

Even more compelling is a post written in July of 2009, following Raúl Castro’s directive to allow Cubans to stay in state hotels. Cubanacán, the state tourism agency, began sending out offers tailored to Cubans. In her post, Díaz lists the prices for different vacation packages — 79, 105, 150 CUCs, the coin equivalent to the U.S. dollar. She also points out that a state worker in Cuba makes no more than 25 CUC a month. Criticizing the government for catalyzing the divide between the haves and haves-not, she quotes Martí, who advocated for a revolution “with everyone and for everyone.” Díaz then quotes Fidel, who’s said that Cuba’s revolution was created “with the humble, by the humble and for the humble.” Finally, she recalls Che’s humility after the decisive, revolutionary victory in Santa Clara, a province two hours away from Havana, when he told one of his comrades that he would not be allowed to ride into the capital in his convertible, but rather would have to find another vehicle or otherwise walk with the other triumphant revolutionaries.

Díaz criticizes the government for implementing policies that hinder Cuba’s commitment to socialist equality by throwing their own words in their faces. Her criticism even extends to those who reap the benefits available to them — the remittance receivers, private business owners, black market workers, and state officials and representatives, who take advantage of their positions of power. As Pioneers do, measuring themselves and others against the perfect New Man, Diaz uses revolutionary rhetoric to criticize the betrayal of the “national project,” adopted to “guarantee equity or put the tenets of social justice into practice” by the state and Cuban populace alike.

The blog Cartas Desde Cuba, or Letters from Cuba, by Fernando Ravsberg is another such space for criticism of the government. On the home page, right next to the name of the blog is a quote by José Martí, which says that the news must “disobey the appetite of personal well-being and in an impartial manner attend to the public good.”104 He justifies his citizen journalism, intent on revealing the truth and “attending to the public good” by citing Martí, the father of Cuban independence and Fidel’s personal hero. A popular poem by Nicolas Guillén says, Te lo prometió Martí/y Fidel te lo cumplió, “Marti promised, Fidel delivered,” and Ravsberg is inadvertently questioning whether this has actually been the case. Martí, who was a renowned poet and newspaper man, felt strongly about freedom of the press, which Cuba has come under fire for disregarding.

Cuban Hip-Hop

Like bloggers, musicians often purport to represent the Cuban reality the state chooses to ignore. Los Aldeanos, the hip-hop duo previously mentioned, are representative of a generation that grew up with the revolution at its most vulnerable — the Special period. As Blum notes, since then, “shifting and stability in socialist ideology remain, producing both loyalty and betrayal” by the Cuban people. Though these new “revolutionaries” take a lot for granted, they have also never experienced the unadulterated pleasures of socialism at its best. The advent of the internet, mp3s and flash drives has helped spread underground and non-state-sanctioned music. Like with blogging, technology has facilitated mass-consumption of anti-state sentiments through music, particularly rap and hip-hop.

Scholars have argued that “the revolutionary imagination conveyed in Cuban hip-hop” has been generally linked “to the struggle against neoliberal imperialism,” much like the revolution itself. Others have stressed the identification of these same musicians with revolutionary ideology generally. According to Nora Gámez Torres, Los Aldeanos’ music in particular “engages with the revolutionary imaginary but through the dislocation of the Cuban Revolution as the primary point of reference of the revolutionary framework. The radical politics of confrontation of Los Aldeanos mobilizes a subversive ‘revolutionary’ identity and presents it as a potential new political agent in the Cuban context.”

Like Ravsberg, who claims to be a voice where the state press is silent, Los Aldeanos frequently claim to represent “the voice of ‘the people’... asserting a genuine type of (political)

105 Blum, Cuban Youth, 176.
106 Ibid., 176.
107 Ibid., 4
108 Ibid., 5.
representation, which is based, primarily, on shared life experiences that can breach the gap between everyday life and official discourse to voice ordinary people’s concerns and opinions.” Like Díaz, they also reject Cuban-American voices coming from Miami, claiming that they have left, abandoned the struggle, and as such, given up the right to make a difference.¹⁰⁹

Through their ardent criticism they are constantly invoking revolutionary morality and values. In their song *El rap es guerra,* “Rap is war,” they say, “I will see my mission through/ Camouflaged, censorship cannot catch me/The task is arduous but I will not falter/I will be a hero or a martyr for my people/Know that I will never betray you/I belong to the guerilla which does not lie.”¹¹⁰ Directly invoking the image of Che as a guerilla fighter, the rap duo warrant their criticism, their subversive lyrics (“rap is war,” as the chorus reminds us over and over again), through the person which they were taught to revere. They will not be censored because their voice matters, because silencing oppression is anti-revolutionary, anti-Che, anti-Cuba.

In another one of their most popular songs, *Viva Cuba Libre,* a refrain that has been used since times of independence (it translates to, long live a free Cuba), Los Aldeanos criticize the state for the many inconsistencies it embodies and human rights violations it has committed. They say that while the rhetoric points to the fact that “everything belongs to the people,” the state is the ultimate authority. They criticize the state’s denial of truth, lack of choice, a state salary in Cuban pesos where stores charge in dollars... The last stanza, however, is most important:

“*The only feeling greater than the love of liberty is hate for those who deny it,”*

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 6.
¹¹⁰ Translation mine.
Said Che Guevara, commander of truth.

I am sure you know that you can't play games here

Patria o muerte, venceremos,\(^{111}\) that's what we have been taught.

We no longer believe you, the deceit is over

Too much time for silence and fear, get off the stage

Revolution is changing what must be changed\(^{112}\)

Enough with the worn-out story about times being worse before

I was born with your lies and know that there's something better

Peace and love for my people

_Viva Cuba Libre\(^{113}\)_

Here, Los Aldeanos quote Che Guevara to make it known that the Cuban state is denying them that which the revolutionary fought for. Calling him the commander of truth (he is often referred to as “comandante” Guevara) is particularly effective, helping us understand that he and his ideals are the ultimate representation of social justice. Most important, however, is the line that says “revolution is changing what must be changed.” This speaks directly to the idea that revolution cannot be taught as a static force. Che Guevara, like the revolution itself, cannot imbue Cubans with a sense of passivity and acceptance of the status quo. Revolution means criticism, subversiveness, change. In this song, they seek a freer, more just “Cuba libre” by invoking the ideals of Che and the socialist revolution they were taught in school.

\(^{111}\) Patria o Muerte and Venceremos! are two of the state’s slogans, which translate to Fatherland or Death and We will overcome! which is attributed to something Che Guevara said.

\(^{112}\) Fidel Castro said this in one of his first speeches in 1959.

\(^{113}\) Translation mine.
Through their music, Los Aldeanos construct a kind of “social antagonism via the
deconstruction of state ideology and the presentation of the historical leadership as illegitimate”
while re-appropriating “revolutionary ideology to promote action through confrontation.”114 In
many ways, their “social antagonism reveals the impossibility for hegemonic projects to stabilize
meanings” within a revolutionary framework.115

Los Aldeanos are crucial to understand the implications of education, particularly during
the decades since the Special Period to the present. Because of the crisis of values, Los Aldeanos
show us that “Cuban social subjects cannot fully attain their revolutionary or socialist identity,”
and therefore “construct an ‘enemy’ [the state] who is deemed responsible for this ‘failure.’”116
These musicians challenge the legitimacy of the Cuban state leaders for capitalizing on a “heroic
past” when in reality, they are “too old to carry on a ‘real’ revolution.”117 We can see from their
lyrics an understanding of revolution with a lower-case “r,” which proposes a constantly
evolving phenomenon, in which the status quo is always being questioned and then modified.
Importantly, while “Los Aldeanos represent the current situation as unjust and unbearable, they
also mobilize the revolutionary imaginary to define ‘struggle’ as the path of action that could
achieve a ‘social change that is not convenient to the government,’” much like Fidel and Che did
55 years ago.118 Their lyrics embody a revolutionary identity that the Revolution no longer
represents.

114 Gámez Torres, “Rap is war,” 5.
115 Ibid., 7.
116 Ibid., 8.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid., 9.
Chapter 5

Conclusion: What’s next? Implications For Education and Cuba’s Future

Schooling has always been one of the most important tools of the Cuban state. From the Literacy Campaign, to the Battle of Ideas, to the present, the Cuban government has adopted the understanding that ideological adherence is best achieved through schooling. It’s true that educational campaigns seek to address inequalities, but some have also had “their roots in a defensive and defiant reaction.”119 This is because education is seen as an effective tool to combat deviation and resistance to state rhetoric.120 Though of course formal schooling in Cuba is complimented by propaganda of all sorts (state media included) like in many other countries, it is nonetheless the primary tool to impart state messages and values to its people. The passionate, perpetual focus on education since 1959 does nothing but show its terrific importance.

Cuban blogs and hip-hop music show us that schooling is a double-edged sword, though. While the values, images and moralities that the state has imparted were intended to achieve ideological unity, their revolutionary nature has given the Cuban people power in ways that the state might not have intended. Elaine Díaz, Fernando Ravsberg and Los Aldeanos are all proof that Cubans are constantly using the language and values of the revolution to criticize and subvert state policies and rhetoric.

Conversations with my Cuban acquaintances showed me something similar. One of my best friends, who was finishing his last year at the teacher’s college in Havana, was incredibly critical of the health system, media, inaccessibility to the Internet and general corruption within the government. He often invoked Che and his ideas on the dangers of bureaucracy, which is part

120 Blum, Cuban Youth, 207.
of a required reading for freshmen of any major at the University of Havana. More often than not, he talked about Martí, his personal hero with whom he had become acquainted in elementary school. My friend told me that it was ironic that the government talked so much about the ideals he so eloquently wrote about, and did so little to uphold them. As is seeming more apparent, he wasn’t the only one. Whether it is apparent to communities outside the island or not, young Cubans are resisting. And they’re doing it because of the government, not in spite of it.

In the United States, we often endorse this idea that Cubans want their government out and are either unable or too indoctrinated to do anything about it. Apart from being unfair, this is untrue. Cubans, both because of their innate inventiveness, passion and tenacity, and the influence of the revolutionaries they constantly encounter in school, work diligently and constantly to criticize the state — to create a better society which is reflective of their values. My friend studied to become a teacher — chose to stay in Cuba and work for the state, like Lizabet — because he loves his country, despite its many faults. He does not accept it as it is, and through the language, morality and values of those heroes which he was taught to admire, strives to create change within the framework of socialist equality.

The images of Che, Martí and Fidel plastered on every school wall, the heroic tales of the revolutionaries found across the pages of every history textbook — much like the slogans painted on billboards and buildings all across Havana — may have been intentioned to create ideological unity. Literacy may have been emphasized to ensure that Cubans memorized these slogans and read the stories. Where ideology revolves around socialist revolution, however — not individualism, capitalism, like in the U.S. — unity creates collective resistance. And where
there is literacy, there is human agency. As such, the Cuban state has created the incredible
ability (through literacy) and opportunity (through rhetoric) for dissent within the existing
structure and ideological framework. The problem may be, perhaps, that a revolution and its
revolutionaries can never truly be institutionalized.

*The “So-What?” For Education*

“Revolutionary education implies the constant transformation of reality.... the Literacy
Crusade set this process in motion, empowering people to transcend the limitations of their past.
However, the difficulties really begin once the oppressive regime is forgotten, when the reality to
be transformed is the product of the revolutionary state itself. If education is to continue to be
transformative, it must challenge reality. How, then, is it possible for a revolutionary State to
design education programmes which to be revolutionary must challenge the state? Either the
State dictates the content of a revolutionary education and silences criticism as counter-
revolutionary, in which case the education system becomes as oppressive as its predecessors, or
the State accepts the challenge and nurtures a continuing revolution in education, which might
overthrow the very structures that made it possible.”

It is clear, as the above quote shows, that achieving education-as-liberation is not an easy
feat. Freire may have been wrong, however, when he made us believe that the potential of
schooling exclusively exists in this dichotomous world. If he were alive, or if he had ever
commented on the state of Cuban schooling, Freire would have said that Cuba betrayed the
concept of education-as-liberation by doing little to change the banking-model Batista had once
employed. But the picture is clearly neither that simple nor clear-cut. This thesis has shown at
least that much.

The fact that Cuban students have been empowered by the Revolutionary education they
have received is crucial to understand the impact of content. Even where there isn’t a space to be
critical under official guidance, Cubans have made a space for themselves outside of institutions

to resist the government. By mirroring themselves after revolutionaries like Martí and Che, Cuban students are (as Freire himself says) “fighting to be human,” and in fact “take away the oppressors’ power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression.”122 Though Cuban education may not have had this intent, it has almost unquestionably had this outcome.

This is of great importance to any context in schooling because it gives agency and power not just to the student, but the teacher, even when she is working within the strict bounds of state control (which is, it might be noted, eerily absent in Freire’s idealistic conceptions of education). Even if standardized testing is the order of the day — if the transmission of information is valued over the development of critical thinking skills — some information is more prone to create critical students than other. The case of Cuba in fact shows us that imparting a version of history or reality that privileges narratives of resistance and human agency inherently engenders political empowerment.

Literacy and revolutionary rhetoric are a powerful combination. And while Freire may be right that “liberation is a praxis,”123 liberation may, in reality, come in different forms, sizes and directions. Cuba’s revolutionary morality is lucky in that it inherently humanizes. The values Che Guevara, Jose Martí and Fidel Castro represent are crucial to common understandings about social justice and equality. These values, however, are not immutable, and can be applied elsewhere.

When pedagogues talk about teaching for social justice, it may therefore be worth considering what is now happening across classrooms in Cuba. The next few years may be

123 Ibid., 60.
crucial to substantiate my claim that these values have the power to transform the country. Cuban education may have, we might see, inadvertently become “transformative,” giving people the tools to “challenge reality” moving forward. 124

Cuba’s future

Ever since the economic reforms of the 1990s, and particularly since Raúl Castro’s economic reforms in 2011 (through which more industries were opened to the private market), there are “obvious contradictions between the principles of equality, justice, and collectivism professed by the Cuban state and the realities of economic adjustment, which have brought about market inequalities and unemployment.” 125 When it comes to education, there continues to be a “disconnect between what students are taught to believe about their country and what they actually observe.” 126 Elaine Díaz’s blog and Los Aldeanos’ music prove that the values Cuban schools impart have important political implications. These beliefs — values, morals — are not neutral. In fact, their “revolutionary” quality creates significant opportunities for resistance.

Gramsci’s conception about “common will, ideas, and morals” as a “powerful force of domination ... substantially greater than the sum of its material resources” 127 is crucial as we look towards Cuba’s future. As long as the Cuban state continues to introduce new policies distancing itself from its own ideological foundation, it becomes especially important that Cubans still exist and believe in this ideology. Cubans’ consent to the state’s power may be based on the coming together of “ideology, common will, and material resources” — what Gramsci referred to as a

124 Archer and Costello, Literacy and Power, 40.
126 Ibid., 49.
127 Haugaard, “Power and Hegemony in Social Theory,” 47.
"historic bloc." Because the state has few material resources to speak of, the more it abandons an ideology so crucial to the preservation of the Revolution, the more resistance it will likely encounter — the "historic bloc" may crumble.

The fact that the youngest generation of Cuban adults (born in the 1990s) have almost solely experienced scarcity under the Castros is also critical in addressing the country’s future. Unlike older Cubans, they do not have the memory of pre-revolutionary times, which has for some inspired continuous and often undeserved loyalty to Fidel and the Revolution. Young Cubans’ resentment, combined with a lack of understanding, or perhaps interest in ‘what could have been’ without Fidel, may lead to more unabashed criticism of the Revolution. As long as the state continues to inspire a fundamental belief in the revolutionary morality that it betrays with every new policy, it is likely that these spaces of resistance will broaden. The fact that the Cuban government itself has, in the last year, expressed a “generational-based panic” over young Cubans’ lack of commitment to the Revolution proves that much.129

As Cristina Venegas argues, this is perhaps the reason the internet will have such significant political consequences. As she says,

"The generation of Cubans joining the digital era are the grandchildren of the revolution... Their lot has been defined by the hardship of extreme times. This generation and its aspirations, complaints and desires is changing and intensifying the nature of opposition to the government through fresh forms of expression. The call for new approaches to reform, expressed by citizens and the Cuban-based opposition, is informed by different roots of discontent than those underlying the demands of hard-line exiles,” which call for a complete break with the revolutionary government.130

128 Ibid.
130 Venegas, Digital Dilemmas. 184.
Blogs exposing the Cuban reality may indeed serve to counter Miami’s far-reaching narrative about an unconditionally oppressed populace. They have and will increasingly show a country that may not be interested in an American political or economic model. This may have implications for Cuba’s relations with the United States. Negating common understandings that vilify Cuba could, for instance, help remove the country from the State Department’s terrorist list.

But the internet will most likely and primarily affect change within the island. This new platform can “offer the possibility for the displaced to become both ‘discursively emplaced’ and ‘virtually present.’”131 Blogging especially “creates personal platforms and intellectual communities, and tests the boundaries of censorship and expression,” which could have an impact on repressive practices on the part of the state. The increasing diversity of Cuban narratives could serve to undermine the static vision the state has created of its people too,132 and the appearance of online communities could strengthen the foundations of civil society.133 In other words, this new forum has the ability to “democratise the public sphere,” as Cubans “struggle to make their voices heard and institute independent views on the present and future of the nation, proposing a new, more democratic political project.”134

Though it’s safe to say that Cubans have always criticized the government in private spheres, this new generation may bring discontent and resistance into the public, like the blogosphere and music scene have shown. This act in and of itself proves that resistance may

131 Ibid., 157.
132 Ibid.
134 Ibid., 177.
have more tangible consequences than the previously hushed criticisms to transform the political, economic and social directions the country may be heading in. The continued strength of the revolutionary imaginary may push Cuba in different directions than we expect. Especially as the country continues to open itself to foreign influence and neoliberal forces, resistance through the invocation of socialist, revolutionary values could be a powerful force for change away from capitalism. Though it is possible that the Castro reign will end, it is equally as likely that the political outcome may not reflect the demands of the Cuban exile community. The Revolution may die, but it seems that *la revolución* could keep carrying on.
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