

Ten Years Later: Are the Cuban People Cultured?

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In 2001, then President of Cuba Fidel Castro, in his desire to show the world that Cuba's people are cultured, despite being from a Third World country, declared: "Today we are fighting for a General Integral Culture. In the next ten years, we will quadruple the knowledge we have attained over the past 42 years." Likewise, he and his State Council took it as a given that in a decade Cuba would be the most cultured country in the world. In other words, by 2011, ten years after that premonition, Cuba should have surpassed Germany, Sweden, Japan, Denmark or Finland as to the level of culture of all its citizens. The most cultured country in the world would have displaced the rest of the Caribbean. In addition to tropical tourism, it would have a kind of cultural tourism through which foreigners could come to exchange ideas and enjoy the goodness of knowledge. Yet, what exactly are a cultured people?

I believe that when the former Cuban President spoke of a most cultured people he meant and wanted us to understand that he was talking about an exponential growth in knowledge. He was generalizing it to all of Cuba's social levels, referring to overall, integral knowledge (such that one person might know about more than one discipline), and the deepening and bringing current of this knowledge to the peo-

ple, so that Cubans could discover the advances taking place all over the world.

This cultured Cuban could finally visualize him or herself through a common language acceptable and accepted by society. This language expresses a decent level of communication and cohabitation, and a comfortable form of movement facilitated by culture. This means that we would understand by a cultured person that we mean a person who knows well the public and advertised culture, that is, the dominant symbolic signs that serve as the critical foundation for social conviviality. This concept includes culture in its aesthetic or artistic sense, as a symbol and symptom, and signifies 'cultured' in its Western definition. Precisely because I work in the educational system, and know something about the student body and its parents, the Ministry of Education, Cuban society and its government, when I heard Castro's declaration, I told myself "seeing is believing."

It's been ten long years and all the while I have sincerely wanted the prophecy to come true. Yet, just how far is Cuba from that reality? Yes, illiteracy was done away with, but that is a very long way from creating a cultured people, with a general integral culture. That would be a very difficult thing to accomplish, and Cuba is in no way ready to accomplish it.

If we speak of a cultured people as a whole, we have to analyze how each of its parts, each Cuban functioned, without regard for his or her social position. To do this in a practical manner, I invite you to observe the daily behavior of average Cuban citizens. It is important to once again take up the issue of language, because it is language that communicates culture, and something strange is occurring: language and culture are one and the same thing.

Ten years later, there is nothing in public language that reflects that Cubans should be considered a cultured people. Cues at service centers, behavior on public transportation, children at primary school, adolescents both inside and outside school, all these scenes reveal that culture—in its Western sense—has not permeated Cuban society. Things are just as they were: culture is the purview of specific elites whose precise job it is to be cultured. We should take note here of the crisis language is undergoing among Cubans of a critical, adolescent age. Its impoverishment is extremely worrisome because it is revealing a low level of general knowledge, and an inability to engage in enriching communication. Adolescents need to be dealt with in a manner suitable for their rapid and difficult transition period, something that is not taking place in our schools.

On the other hand, language too means behavior, and social behavior in Cuba is far from what one might expect from a cultured people. Learning bad behavior, which in Cuba is called 'formal' education, is the best indicator of our uncultured condition: shouting, violence in all its manifestations, and a common use of obscenities are the clearest evidence of the generally uncultured nature of our society.

The use and abuse of what culture considers obscene words and phrases is seen by at least one linguistic trend as part of a natural evolution: each era has its own language, and youth are the bearers of its novelties. I am struck by this tendency because linguistic obscenity is somehow related to the modesty and constant worry of polite people to not reveal

any of their private parts. This is the only thing that obscenity affects, nothing more. The only way for this new mentality regarding verbal obscenity to make coherent sense would be if there were similar changes in people's corporal behavior. One cannot hide one's body while concomitantly interpreting vulgar references to their body parts as something natural to language change. As far as this matter is concerned, Cuban society is definitely not cultured. Furthermore, it is rapidly aging and continues ascribing the language of its 'past' a preeminent position.

Family dysfunctionality is yet another factor that reveals the uncultured social nature. A large number of dysfunctional families are the way they are because of their emotional inability to manage conflicts between married couples with their children, as well as due to a high degree of marital infidelity. What I mean is that culture is not the number of books one reads, math one knows, or languages one speaks. That kind of culture is already in crisis. Yet, a person can also be seen as cultured by dint of how he or she relates to others, and why. This is what we would normally call civilized behavior, which in Cuba is at the lowest of levels.

I feel obliged to say that an essential criterion in determining not only a society's level of culture, but that culture's quality, is to see the role of violence in that society, and the degree to which it is used for everyday functioning. It is well known that violence is actually what happens when there is an absence of language, that language is the principal vehicle of culture, and it is the greatest measure of a society's ability to assimilate culture. Violence is a way of life among Cubans: intra-family violence, violence at schools and in communities, violence in public places, and violence in verbal communication—and this is not taking into account psychological and gestural violence, which are very common as a way for poorer people to resolve their differences. Why all these different forms of violence? Because of the State's very own violence. It serves as a mirror in which all

other subsystems see themselves. Thus, when examining a particular fact or event, we should do so while taking into account that it is part of a whole. If we can, we should always take that whole into account when analyzing any particular aspect of it. The government's public language reinforces society's violence. It is like a language of war, and with it come more enemies, death, and sorrow. The value of its words increases in the mirror, which causes people to see as natural the violent way in which it communicates with its citizens. It is precisely because of this, that vulgar language, which is associated with a lack of culture, is now seen as 'normal' in Cuba. Outside of Cuba, there are digitalized codes to filter out any verbal violence on television and in music. In Cuba, violence permeates language and gesture in everything from Reggaeton to political discourse.

What we have here is a sociological problem, because this violence pits racial marginality and unculturedness against the authentic interests of racial integration. Integration, too, can come about through a shared language.

Unfortunately, the lack of culture of the last ten years has grown proportionately to the degree to which the language of marginality and prisons has become socialized and 'natural.' The relationship between violent and vulgar language, and raciality, must be studied through the lens of culture and via our society's psychological predisposition to engage high culture's concerns.

In Cuba, to be cultured means to know and be conversant in the culture of the *others*, of blacks from Africa. If Cubans are truly to become a cultured people, then we must all study religion and the specific social behaviors it generates. This is not currently part of our academic curriculum, nor is the place of blacks in Cuban history, or their traditions, religiosity or experiences. The marginalization of these *others* is the result of the marginalization of their knowledge in a value system that truly or theoretically informs our educational system.

The marginalization of the cultural history of the *others* strengthens the concomitant marginalization of the language and violence with which these *others* try to affirm and acknowledge themselves in our society. If that history and tradition is not taken up by the high culture that defines whether or not a society or nation is cultured, the resulting feedback causes a large portion of that society to reject and see as strange what is ultimately a tradition. This comes about through language and behavior, and causes the group's further marginalization.

Can such a society be cultured? Of course not. So long as we constantly see urban violence in our racial communities, gestural and referential violence, dysfunctional families, and an absence of an appropriate language through which to channel conflicts and differences when seeking to resolve needs and concerns, we cannot speak about a cultured people. In Cuba, this means more than half the population.

Ten years later, our country reveals it has gone back to the limits of unculturedness, not only or so much due to culture impoverishment, which is obvious among the enlightened third of our population, but because of the depth of violence in our most marginal social sectors. What is human, terribly human about all this, is entirely naked at these levels of society. This serves to help us understand not these social strata in and of themselves, but rather as a place from which to understand the rest of society and culture, as such.

The fact that Havana's historic district is situated in one of that city's most marginal areas—Old Havana—is not only an architectural metaphor for the country's unfulfilled cultural pretensions, but also of the living experience of the spiritual communication between the government's obvious lack of culture and the natural unculturedness of society's marginalized groups. It is not so strange that the language and behavior of those on top and the underdogs meet somewhere in the middle.