

[The best policy, the most revolutionary in the field of culture](#)



From the very taking of power in January 1959, Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro was fully aware that the transformations that had to be undertaken in the country entailed not only urgent changes to the economic and social reality, but also in the way of conceiving and understanding the keys to those changes in the minds of women and men.

If dignity was the first value recovered by a majority of the people, exploited for centuries and marginalized from the exercise of civil rights, it was essential to make sustainable and extend that notion in the times to come, and that would only be possible on the basis on a cultural revolution, that had among its greatest and most challenging tasks the literacy campaign, just two years after the popular victory. The aim was to make an obvious sum a reality: equating liberty, education, culture, and development.

That same year of the literacy campaign, a few weeks after defeating the mercenary invasion at Playa Girón, which sought to reverse history, Fidel met with a large group of writers and artists at the National Library. His speech is known as Words to the Intellectuals, which, for various reasons, is considered one of the starting points in the design of the Revolution's cultural policy, although not the only one.

It should be recalled that in the first months of 1959, parallel to the Agrarian Reform, a devastating blow against large landholders, the Revolutionary Government established, with Fidel as the main promoter, the necessary institutions to bring about changes in the cultural sphere.

Thus the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry, the Casa de las Américas, the National Theater of Cuba, the National Symphony Orchestra, and the National Printing Press of Cuba, were all founded. That is, the possibility of making the leap from a colonized screen to one at the service of

decolonization; the creation of a network of relations aimed at the integration of the peoples of Our America; the protection and promotion of theatre, dance, and folkloric and popular cultural expressions; the reformulation of the main entity for the promotion of concert music; and the distribution of books and promotion of reading on a scale unimaginable until then.

Neither should the early support for the National Ballet of Cuba be forgotten. Fidel took a personal interest in the needs of the company led by Alicia Alonso, in such a dire situation during the dictatorship.

From Words to the Intellectuals, it is usual to highlight just the definition proposed by Fidel at the end of that enlightening and productive encounter June 30, 1961: "Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing." Some have sought to use that phrase, isolated from its context, as an exclusionary norm. In those same words, Fidel clarifies the scope of the proposal; if on the one hand he asserted the right of the Revolution to defend itself against the onslaught of imperialism and its allies – Girón was a clear sign, as well as the encouragement of counterrevolutionary armed gangs, the operations of U.S. intelligence services, and the diplomatic encirclement of the island by that country – on the other, he opened channels for additions and not subtraction, for inclusion and participation in cultural work without making distinctions based on creed, conviction, or aesthetics.

The leader of the Revolution offered decisive backing to the democratization of culture. He spoke of the creation of a novel arts education system, of the population's access to cultural centers, and of the training of young talents, regardless of their background or assets.

Thus this cultural policy, which was drawn up on the basis of concepts and concrete actions, was inherently anti-dogmatic, including the antipodes of certain practices enthroned in the Soviet Union and European countries of the socialist camp, in which aesthetic norms were dictated in the name of so-called Socialist Realism, and the discoveries of artistic avant-gardes were ignored and even stigmatized.

In the application and interpretation of this policy, and its continuous and necessary development, there were well-known moments of unrest, on which we must continue to reflect to extract lessons and take precautions: frowned on books and stagings; condemnation and exclusion based on absurd and obsolete moral standards; attempts to implant an exclusive aesthetic canon; and distorted and impoverishing ideological standards in the consideration of works and authors. The period between 1971 and 1976 has been described as the Gray Quinquennium of the Cuban cultural fabric, to borrow the shrewd expression coined by respected intellectual Ambrosio Fornet.

Once again Fidel contributed to fixing wrongs by placing Armando Hart at the head of the Ministry of Culture in 1976, a revolutionary leader who will always be remembered for his consistent radicalism based on the thought of Martí, Marx, and Fidel; his broadmindedness; and the exercise of a principle exalted by the leader of the Revolution – permanent, frank and transparent dialogue with artists and intellectuals.

Fidel listened and debated on numerous occasions with creators; he was aware of their concerns and shared initiatives. For him, commitment, participation, and the utmost ethics were consubstantial pillars of the cultural policy of the Revolution.

In 1993, when many around the world were sure of the imminent fall of Cuban socialism, and domestically, certain values were being eroded faced with the prevailing material scarcities, on speaking with delegates to the UNEAC Congress, Fidel expressed: "The first thing to save is culture ." Who, if not someone endowed with a far-reaching, politically and intellectually lucid strategic vision, could substantiate such a concept in the midst of the prevailing circumstances?



Gabriel García Márquez, Fidel, and Fernando Birri at the inauguration of the San Antonio de los Baños International School of Film and Television.

On the occasion of the recently held Congress of the Hermanos Saíz Association, the Casa Editora Abril publishing house presented the book *Fidel y la AHS*, compiled by Elier Ramírez, with a prologue by Abel Prieto. Its pages include for the first time Fidel's speeches and dialogues with young artists at two moments: March 12, 1988, and October 18, 2001.

These reflections complete those offered by the leader of the Revolution in congresses and sessions of the UNEAC National Council, in his meetings with university staff and students, and in international forums in which he addressed the importance of ideas in the formation of new generations, the conception of cultural policy and processes of social transformation.

I share with Abel Prieto the perception that Fidel still calls us "to continue debating with him, with his ideas, with his proposals on how to defend the central space of culture in the Revolution, to heal damaged areas of the spiritual fabric of our society, to resist colonizing attacks, to become definitively more cultured and freer."

Exactly 30 years ago, Fidel challenged us to fulfill a mission that we can never suspend, much less now in times of renewal and generational continuity in the leadership of our process and in updating and perfecting the Cuban socialist model:

"I think we can have both: the best aesthetic education program and the best cultural policy, and I said that if we succeed in everything else, and we do not succeed in this, we should feel ashamed, we should feel unable to solve a problem in this field. Evidently it has been the terrain where revolutionary processes and socialist countries have encountered the most difficulties. Let us work and fight so that we can say with pride: we have the right policy, the best policy, the most revolutionary in the field of

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culture.”

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