

NUESTRA REVOLUCION NO SERA TELEVISADA: NEW FORMS OF EXPRESSION IN
CUBA'S CIVIL SOCIETY

by

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to expand the scholarship dealing with the topic of civil society in Cuba, this thesis deals with the question of Cuban civil society and its relationship with socially conscious underground musicians. It is argued that these musicians have established a tradition of political and social involvement on the island throughout the revolutionary period, and that they have been particularly effective and vocal during the years 1990-2010. The main theme has been analyzed through a Post-Marxist framework with the objective of taking into account not only the political and social value of the music, but also the aesthetics of it and its popularity among the Cuban population and particularly the youth of Cuba. Some of the artists featured in this thesis include hip hop duo Los Aldeanos, trovador Carlos Varela, and the rock band Buena Fé.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

ANAP.....	Asociación Nacional de Agricultores Pequeños
CDR.....	Comités de Defensa de la Revolución
CIDA.....	Canadian International Development Agency
CTC.....	Central de Trabajadores de Cuba
CUC.....	Peso Convertible Cubano
FEU.....	Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios
FMC.....	Federación de Mujeres Cubanas
ICAIC.....	Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográfico
MINREX.....	Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Cuba
NEA.....	National Endowment for the Arts
NGO.....	Non Governmental Organization
PCC.....	Partido Comunista de Cuba
UCI.....	Universidad de Ciencias Informáticas
UMAP.....	Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción
UNEAC.....	Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba
U.S.....	United States of America
USAID.....	United States Agency for International Development

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

I. RATIONALE

While music influences daily life in a myriad of ways, its relationship with the political sphere and civil society is a topic that has been largely ignored in the scholarship. “Influence” can be a way of describing the interdependence between music and an individual or group, the same relationship can also be aptly described as a “reflection.” Popular, socially conscious music not only attempts to influence the listener; a great deal of its popularity is also derived from its accurate portrayal of, and identification with, the problems and desires of the specific sector of society it seeks to represent.

Thus, this thesis strives to analyze the evolving relationship between Cuban civil society, the Cuban government, and a specific group of artists, namely, underground socially conscious musicians¹ during the period ranging from 1990 to 2010.² It will be argued that these types of artists are particularly active in the political sphere of the country, and can be deemed as representatives of the Cuban civil society. In the words of Gramsci, these musicians can be understood as true “organic intellectuals.”³ They provide a creative and relevant space in which

¹“Socially conscious musicians” refers to artists who are unable to reach the mainstream channels of distribution in Cuba, mainly due to the highly controversial character of their creations. Their music usually centers in political and social themes experienced by the Cuban population, although international subject matters have also been touched upon.

²This period was chosen for several reasons. During these 20 years the economic and socially crisis commonly known as the Special Period (prompted by the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the consequences that this disruption had in the Cuban economy) developed in the island. Most importantly, however, is the rise of a new generation on the island, one that largely re-conceptualized the revolutionary process. It is during this period that some of the most relevant socially conscious musicians became popular, precisely as a result of the economic, social and political disruptions experienced as a result of the Special Period.

³The term will be explored in depth in the upcoming theoretical framework.

Cuban society at large (but most importantly Cuban youth) can engage in political and socially relevant activities and commentary.

Exploring the relationship between Cuban socially conscious underground musicians and Cuban civil society has been one of my recurrent interests. To a Cuban residing outside of the island, the misrepresentation of Cuban civil society by the media and much of the scholarship is evident, and has remained an issue that needs to be addressed. The idea to write this thesis appeared for the first time in the year 2009. The spark was provided by the massive media attention focused upon *El Concierto por La Paz*⁴ to take place in Havana on September of that same year. The extensive (and biased) media coverage placed a great deal of importance upon the invitations to perform extended to a number of Cuban artists, and more importantly, it criticized heavily the exclusion of those who were not invited to perform.⁵ The concert became a massive political event, with the consequent polarization of opinions regarding the effect it would have (if any) upon the Cuban government. It was then that Cuban underground artists became visible in the international sphere, since many of them were not invited by the main star of the concert, Juanes and the rest of the organizing committee to perform in the concert.

⁴ The concert took place on September 20th 2009 in Havana. Media sources reported the event as a way of bridging the “isolation” of the island, and a way of bringing music to the deprived Cuban population. This position ignored the great musical talent in the island. For further information see “Hundreds of thousands attend Cuba peace concert” http://articles.cnn.com/2009-09-20/world/cuban.peace.concert_1_juanes-peace-without-borders-concert-cuban-exiles?_s=PM:WORLD

⁵ Interviews were conducted from Miami in order to find out what the feelings of the excluded musicians were. The questions were undoubtedly biased. The Cuban institutions had no hand in choosing the artists that were to perform in the concert, but instead the organizing committee (led by Colombian singer Juanes in charge) was. Further, while performers relevant to this thesis such as Los Aldeanos and Silvito el Libre were (and still are) very popular in the island, they could not compare with the cultural giants that performed in the concert, ranging from Carlos Varela and Silvio Rodríguez to Van Van and Orishas. Interviews and media coverage on the event showcased increasing biases of the media in Miami against the Cuban government. For a relevant example, see portions of Los Aldeanos interview in Maria Elvira Live at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWoGP1tOBM8>

Furthermore, the political coverage of the event and speculation regarding its results made me think about the political influence of music. This concert thus became one of the most important incentives to develop this thesis.

In this context, I sought to fill the gap in the scholarship by not only analyzing musical groups and individual artists, but also by doing so using as much of their material as possible, and by taking into account the interpretations of authors that are many times completely disregarded in the scholarship because of their status as Cubans residing on the island.⁶

II. IMPORTANCE

This research is extremely relevant for contemporary society, since artists have asserted their importance as political and social agents across the globe, not only in Cuba. Concerts feature statements designed by the musicians to influence their audience, and undoubtedly the message is transmitted to the public, and beyond. For instance, in three out of the last four concerts I personally attended (all taking place during the year 2011), performing artists engaged in one way or another in political discourse. Nevertheless, the dynamics of engagement of artists like U2⁷ or Michael Franti⁸ are very different when compared with the interactions between Cuban artists and their public. The closeness associated with living on the same neighbourhoods and experiencing the same challenges at the social, political and economical level makes the

⁶In fact, I would argue that the systematic exclusion of Cuban scholars residing on the island from the scholarship is the result of bigotry and a generalized unwillingness to acknowledge the accomplishments the country has achieved during the revolutionary period, as well as to fully understand the challenges that the Cuban population faces beyond the empty “freedom” demands from the exiled community in the south of Florida, and their representatives in the United States Congress.

⁷Requested help and support for the civil society movements in Myanmar, during the concert held in Edmonton, Alberta on August 2011.

⁸Referred to the ongoing famine in Somalia and asked for help for the people being endangered by it during his concert in Edmonton, Alberta on 2011.

discourse much more believable to the population and much more relevant, thus reinforcing the trust and engagement established between artist and society. Indeed, this closeness and level of representation is one of the main factors that determine the involvement of the artist with society.

It is also worth pointing out that this phenomenon is neither limited to in the musical realm, nor uniquely modern. It suffices to exemplify this statement with *Guernica* of Pablo Picasso,⁹ the melting clocks of Salvador Dalí or even more recently, the conceptual art movement that swept North America, during the 1970s, to realize not only the level of political engagement of the artist as an individual, but most importantly, the level of recognition and acceptance born in the population towards their work in any time period or geographical setting. Furthermore, even though artistic input has not been widely recognized by the scholarship as a successful tool for influencing governmental action, art in all its forms has prompted state responses across the globe, including Cuba. For instance, the United States government has been notable in musical and film censorship,¹⁰ and the practice is far from over. Instead, censorship has moved on to performance art, installations and paintings.¹¹ Even more disturbing,

⁹ *Guernica* was commissioned by the Spanish Popular Front government to be exhibited during the International Exhibition held in Paris in 1937. Picasso admitted that the painting was created as his answer to the fascist bombings in the town of Guernica (hence having a clear political statement) and the viewers in Paris identified the subject clearly. In fact, the Spanish Popular Front did not base their exhibition on questions of economics or politics, as many other countries did, but instead on their distinctive cultural heritage, including paintings by masters like Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró in order to gain international solidarity for the cause. In this context, artists become ambassadors for the country, and provide an international visibility that is not easily achieved by politicians. For further information see Held and Potts (1988).

¹⁰ The government has censored film, music and literary creations, both on a political and moral basis. In terms of popular music, some of the most notable artists subject to this treatment include Frank Zappa, the Beatles, Rage Against the Machine and Prince, just to name a few.

¹¹ Perhaps one of the most notorious incidents of censorship in the visual arts in the United States was the so-called Mapplethorpe and Serrano affair. Senator Jesse Helms (incidentally the same who in conjunction with Representative Dan Burton, proposed the Helms-Burton Act in detriment of Cuba) proposed an amendment in which funding from the National Endowment from the Arts (NEA) would be denied to these two artists and others who would not conform

governments around the world have persecuted artists on the basis of political offences or murdered them, like was the case of famed Víctor Jara in Chile.

III. QUESTIONS TO DEVELOP

In order to fully develop the ideas and goals outlined above, the following central and supporting questions will be addressed in upcoming chapters.

Central Question: What has been the role of socially conscious underground musicians in Cuban civil society during the period 1990-2010?

Secondary Questions:

1. Does their music reflect and affect Cuban social reality and expectations? How?
2. How does the Cuban government deal with this alternative way of civilian input?
3. Why was socially conscious music more widely adopted by youth as a means of citizens' input over more traditional ways such as voting strategies or individual association in interest groups?
4. What are the main demands or complaints made by the artists? Can these be said to reflect the general feelings of the Cuban population?

to certain “decency” parameters. In the end, while the amendment was not accepted, Congress enacted legislation prohibiting NEA from using funds to “promote, disseminate or produce materials considered obscene, including sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value” (qted. In Phelan, 1990, 282). The vague wording and lack of definition of the terms used, makes this sort of legislation an open call for artistic censorship.

IV. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The role of musicians in Cuban civil society will be analyzed through a Post-Marxist theoretical framework. Additionally, a conceptual framework based on the work of Gramsci in “The Prison Notebooks” will be used. A Post-Marxist framework was chosen over an Orthodox Marxist framework for various reasons. Within a Post-Marxist framework the discussion of culture is paramount, as well as the discussion of consciousness and representations such as linguistic and symbolic formations (Carver, 2009, 470). Further, it discusses language - and music by extension - as an integral part of the world and the political systems, instead of a mere representation or way of communication between individuals (Carver, 2009, 470). It is precisely this emphasis on culture as a central part of a society, instead of the emphasis on the economic base that is one of the central characteristics of other Marxist interpretations, that makes Post-Marxism a fitting choice for this research. Thus, the theoretical understandings of Post-Marxism will be significantly more useful for this research than its orthodox counterpart. The idea of Orthodox Marxism was abandoned since the analysis would result in a repetition of the dogmas adopted and repeated by the Cuban government for the last fifty years, instead of contributing new knowledge to the scholarship. Furthermore, the enduring emphasis of Orthodox Marxism in the analysis of the economic base of society, and its continuous assertions that all elements of the superstructure *derive* from it, but do not influence it, could be damaging to the understanding of the role of culture as an integral part of the current social and political Cuban societies. Most importantly, the Cuban situation in the period to be studied cannot be analyzed through a deterministic lens, as it is increasingly pragmatic. For example, an analysis of the Cuban superstructure would fail once the double-economy that operates in the island is included. In this

manner, it has been preferred to adopt a lens that, although critical, also includes contemporary interpretations and understandings of socialism after the fall of the Soviet Union. It is, then, Post-Marxism (not to be confused with Neo-Marxism)¹² that has been chosen as a framework in which to debate the matter at hand.

The Post-Marxist theoretical framework will be complemented with a framework based on - largely Marxist - Ethnomusicology. The two theoretical frameworks are complementary of each other, as Post-Marxism has been linked to theorizing about the role of art in society. For example, they have argued that “too strong a separation of the worlds of transcendence and the ordinary has negative consequences both for the domain of art and for the 'real world'” (Goehr, 1994, 103). Further, the overarching topic in Trotsky’s “Art and Revolution”¹³ and other collected writings states that the declaration of art as existent just for art’s sake (which is to mean, exclusively for an aesthetic purpose) kills art and its intrinsic function in society. Indeed, Trotsky argues regarding art:

It “finds the necessary rhythm of words for dark and vague moods, it brings thought and feeling closer or contrasts them with one another, it enriches the spiritual experience of the individual and of the community, it refines feeling, makes it more flexible, more responsive, it enlarges the volume of thought in advance and not through the personal method of accumulated experience, it educates the individual, the social group, the class and the nation” (Trotsky, 1972, 30).

Thus, Ethnomusicology was chosen as a complimentary theoretical framework as it analyzes music not only based on aesthetics, but also taking into account its influence on a societal and

¹² Neo-Marxism is defined by Carver as “essentially a re-orientation of modern economics towards class issues and class politics, focusing particularly on the disadvantaged” (2009, 468).

¹³ “Art and Revolution” is but an example of Trotsky's work on culture and the role of the arts in society. It is precisely because of his interest in this element of the Marxist superstructure that his work is considered as Post-Marxist in this study, although commentators might contest this point of view.

political context, a process which makes it very useful when analyzing the music produced by socially conscious artists in Cuba.

In addition to these two theoretical frameworks, a conceptual framework must also be taken into account. This will be largely derived from concepts advanced by Gramsci's work. More precisely, the definition and use of the concepts of civil society and the role of the organic intellectual will be of great importance. Gramsci's definition of civil society as a superstructural level that is not separated from the political society or state (Gramsci, 1992, 170) was chosen instead of Hegel's, since it constitutes an accurate description of the Cuban idea of civil society. For example, in Hegel, civil society is the realm in which individual interests can be pursued¹⁴ (Stillman, 2008, 5). Hegel's conceptualization of civil society has been widely used by scholars in western liberal nations, at times interchangeably with terms such as the private sphere. However, to do the same in the analysis of Cuban society would be simply onerous and even counterproductive to the understanding of the phenomenon to be studied, simply because Hegel understands civil society as being an entity completely separated from the political society.

The concept of the organic intellectual as presented by Gramsci will also be used in this thesis. According to Gramsci, organic intellectuals are "distinguished less by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class, than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong" (Gramsci, 1992, 133). Considering this description, this thesis will look at socially conscious musicians in Cuba as organic intellectuals, and consequently it will analyze their role within civil society. Gramsci's characterization of "the intellectual" was chosen over Marx's because it stresses both the

¹⁴ Individuality is the operative word in this analysis. Hegel's emphasis on individualism within civil society makes his conceptualization of the term impossible to employ in the Cuban context, where the collective always takes precedence over the individual.

belonging of the organic intellectual to a specific social group, as well as being a representative of this particular group's interests.¹⁵ By contrast Marx's conceptualization views the intellectual as the leader of the proletariat. In fact, several criticisms state that the intellectual as seen by Marx is nothing more than a new dominant class - with no interest in the underprivileged - taking part in the class struggle to serve his or her own interests (qtd. in Szelenyi, 1982, 779).

V. METHODS

This thesis will be supported by three main research methods: content analysis, participant's observation and literature review. Content analysis of the lyrics produced by socially conscious musicians will be central in achieving an understanding of the message transmitted by these artists to Cuba's civil society. Within the Post-Marxist theoretical framework, this research will employ lyrics as a major source of primary research,¹⁶ since the widespread support they gather from the Cuban population suggest these reflect valid criticisms and viewpoints regarding Cuba's society and its political system.

Participant's observation has also been widely used in this thesis in order to clarify the relationship established between artists and the general population, particularly in the city of

¹⁵I have chosen to say "social group" rather than "class" in this thesis for various reasons. In the period to be studied in Cuba one cannot refer to "class" in the socio-economic sense of the word, or even in the identity defining sense in which it is understood in the western capitalist world. Even though with economic challenges and changes of the Special Period Cuban society has seen some income inequalities, the idea of differentiation between classes has not taken hold in the Cuban mentality yet. Thus, this concept has been excluded from the study.

¹⁶The analysis of the lyrics was preferred over the more traditional concept of formally interviewing the artists as a way of approaching the subject in the same way in which the population in Cuba would. Although informal talks with the artists took place, it must be taken into account that the artists analyzed in this thesis have few (if any) opportunities to be interviewed on the Cuban national television or radio due to censorship, and thus they must communicate their social and political views through art.

Havana, where most of the research was conducted. Personal observations and casual conversations with artists¹⁷ and followers will also shape some of the notions presented in this work.

Finally, literature review will play a central part in the development of this thesis, particularly in the use of sources by Cuban authors and cultural critics. Although these sources are at times disregarded in the scholarship as biased, they offer a deeper understanding of the dynamics in the country that should not be ignored.

This thesis then, will be devoted to the analysis of the relationship between Cuban socially conscious, underground artists and Cuban civil society on the island, through a Post-Marxist framework of inquiry. Furthermore, it will establish a tradition of socially conscious music in Cuba during the revolutionary period, and will prove the importance of this musicians to Cuba's current civil society.

¹⁷ Observation in concerts and spontaneous gatherings, as well as informal conversations with musicians took place during the year 2011 in both Havana, Cuba and Kingston, Ontario.

CHAPTER 2. THE TRADITION OF SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS MUSIC IN CUBA

Socially conscious music and its constant bargaining for governmental attention and support in Cuba are hardly recent phenomena. Current forms of civil society involvement with artistic expression are part of a tradition that has grown from the revolutionary government's cultural policy. This chapter will argue that socially conscious music in Cuba is a direct result of the interest of the revolutionary government in supporting the creation of socially and politically relevant art in the Cuban population. It will also be noted, however, that the existing government-artist dynamics, which can include censorship and debate, are part of an ongoing exchange between both parties originating within the revolutionary process. Finally, the emergence of a socially conscious musical movement in Cuba as part of a larger movement during the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America will also be explored, since it is an integral part of the development of this type of citizen input method in the island.

I. THE PRE-REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

Before beginning an analysis of the establishment of the socially conscious musical tradition during the revolutionary period in Cuba, it is important to compare the treatment of the arts before and after 1959, the year that Fidel Castro led a successful revolutionary movement against Fulgencio Batista. Doing so will allow for a better appreciation of the changes implemented by the revolutionary government in the cultural realm, and of the manner in which these changes have impacted have the Cuban civil society during the last fifty years. The difference between the two periods is truly stark in the treatment of the arts, a feature that can be

appreciated by noticing the limited value accorded to the creation of a national culture in the years preceding 1959.

A rich national artistic realm can be argued to be one of the most important elements in creating a national identity and culture, which in turn leads to an active, nation-wide civil society. Prior to the revolution in 1959, there was no socially relevant national culture we can refer to, but instead a series of exotic and prominently aesthetic acts meant to promote the island as a decadent tourist destination for the American market.¹⁸

In this context it is important to reference the work of Benedict Anderson in the groundbreaking book “Imagined Communities” in which he argues that a communal identity, whether politically or socially (or both) can be achieved through the provision of elements which the entire population considers representative of their own essence (Anderson, 1983, 7). In the case of Cuba, art has been a central element in the creation of a national identity.¹⁹

Whether essential qualities attributed to a specific group are empirically “real” or not, is beyond the point.²⁰ What is central to the creation of a national identity is the public acceptance of these essential elements as their own. Among the symbols or “emblems of nation-ness”

¹⁸In this regard Gold Levi and Heller state “In the 1950s, Cuba was packaged for the enjoyment of the wealthy. By the late 1950s, however, the indelible North American influence was coming under harsh scrutiny. Gradually the imposition of the English language and the relentless proliferation of U.S. wares produced a considerable reaction. The Cubanization of Havana and the reclamation of a true Cuban identity gathered strength among the population” (2002, 4). This situation inevitably led to the revolution in 1959.

¹⁹The creation of an identity perceived to be inherently Cuban was central for nation-building. Not only would it stand in opposition to previous regimes which had supported for all things American, but would also distinguish the new government from their predecessors in a way that was widely visible among the population. With this objective, the new government created cultural institutions such as Casa de las Américas just months after the revolutionary victory.

²⁰ “Essentialism” refers to the idea that there is something inherent in every member of a specific group that positively identifies them as a member of that specific group and no other, and consequently differentiates them from other groups. Fuchs argues that “operationally, essentialism is the failure to allow for variation. Where nothing is allowed to vary, nothing can be explained.” (Fuchs, 2001, 15)

central to the construction of nationhood Anderson includes the national flag, the national anthem and literature (Anderson, 1983, 35). In the case of Cuba, while these symbols are still an important part of the national identity, cultural production since the revolution has become one of the main elements that defines what it means being Cuban for the country's citizens, and as a result art has become one of the most important elements in defining nationhood in the island. This statement becomes obvious if the cultural expressions found in such radically different locations as Havana and Miami are visited. While both cities have opposing political views, the Cuban population in them listens - on average- to similar music. Indeed, many of the Cuban musicians visit Miami (not without political controversy, but still sell out the venues) and the émigré community generally considers itself Cuban, despite many of its members never having set foot on the island.

Governments prior to 1959 generally disregarded the importance of creating a strong national identity and culture in Cuba, and did not take a visible interest in promoting cultural heritage in the masses. The "exotic" nature of Cuba was represented instead through venues such as cabarets and casinos where prostitution flourished. Further, Schwartz argues that during this period "Cubans stitched together a marketable cultural identity from bits and pieces of island life" (Schwartz, 1997, 76). One of the most common elements exploited by governments to represent Cuban culture - and one that unfortunately prevails in the minds of many visitors - has been the image of the fiery *mulata*. Schwartz argues that, starting in the 1920s and probably earlier, the image of the mixed race "typical" Cuban woman had been the object of fantasies and used as a means of promoting the island: "the hips and the high heels are jazz; breasts swathe her in Andalusian softness; under the blare of her rouge African mumbles. The eyes are clouded- a Negress's eyes" (Schwartz, 1997, 81). Indeed, the "exotic" and *kitsch* were the most profitable

ways in which the island could be portrayed to the swarms of largely American tourists that poured into Cuba every year (Schwartz, 1997). The *mulata*, the exotic beaches and the rum-filled decadent nightlife were at the centre of the island's marketing strategy. In the words of Cuban intellectual Alfredo Guevara:

“Cuba aportaba cabarets, lupanares, casinos de juegos, ambientes gangsteriles y bailarinas meneantes. A esto se le llamaba elemento ‘tropical’ o ‘exotismo’”(Guevara, 1998, 121).²¹

While the bulk of superficial and limited cultural production during the times after the World War was targeted to increase revenues through the attraction of American tourists, there were also some genuine forms of expression. For example, the actress Rita Montaner in the film industry and Benny Moré in the musical realm are two of the most outstanding examples. Further, the 1940s and 1950s witnessed an explosion of Cuban music internationally, specially rumba and conga, albeit Americanized versions mostly (Henken, 2006). However, national expressions of culture were largely irrelevant to the majority of the Cuban population since they were principally not targeted to them. Consequently, Cubans adopted more accessible American pop culture and music instead.²² Further, as is the case in many countries today, talented musicians usually left Cuba and travelled to the United States, a practice that detracted from the cultural capital of the island (Henken, 2006, 193). On the topic, Alfredo Guevara states:

“No tiene mayor importancia mi gusto personal, pero diré que aprecio mucho y como disfruté de humor impensado, la carga kitsch de aquel cine, y que pese a sus insuficiencias de todo tipo, la presencia de Rita Montaner en no pocos de esos films justifica verlos. Aun haciendo el ridículo entre palmeras, maracas y pacotilla, Rita

²¹Cuba contributed cabarets, brothels, gambling casinos, gangster-prone environments and wiggling dancers. This was the so-called ‘tropical’ element or ‘exoticism.’

²² It should be noted that even though the bulk of artists were not meaningful to the Cuban population, some like Benny Moré appealed to the working class in Cuba at the time and became central figures in the Cuban culture.

Montaner logra dar ese algo esencial e inaprensible de 'lo cubano' " (Guevara, 1998, 98).²³

While promoting a *kitsch* version of the Cuban nationality, the Batista government in particular also denied funds to meaningful cultural projects that would increase the visibility of Cuba on the international stage and the accessibility of the Cuban population to art and through it, to education and a more cohesive national culture. One of the most visible ways in which the Batista government failed to promote artistic creation in Cuba was the denial of funds to Alicia Alonso to create the first national ballet corps on the island. In recent interviews the *prima ballerina* has argued that the Batista government denied funding unless the company served to justify violent activities the government undertook on a regular basis by performing at the same time and preventing the population from learning about the events. When she refused this proposition, the Batista government denied the funds (Kirk and Padura, 2001, 42). This sort of activity has been adopted by many totalitarian and violent governments around the world. One of the most blatant examples is the use of the 1978 World Cup in Argentina during one of the bloodiest periods of the dictatorship to maintain the world entertained and ignorant regarding the large number of *desaparecidos*²⁴ which the military Junta was responsible for (Smith, 2002, 72).

Beyond the tactics of presenting the island as an exotic playground, one of the main problems that plagued Cuban society and was thus reflected in its identity was the infiltration of North American culture into the island to the detriment of the national cultural production.

Indeed, the American dream was a great part of the Cuban identity, with Havana having more

²³My personal taste does not have much importance, but I will say that I appreciate - and quite enjoyed the thoughtless humour - the kitsch of that cinema, and that regardless of their insufficiency, the presence of Rita Montaner in not few of those movies offers enough justification to watch them. Even being ridiculed among palm trees, maracas, and trash, Rita Montaner manages to produce that something essential and elusive of cubanness.

²⁴Disappeared people, usually murdered by the regime.

Cadillacs per capita in the 1950's than any other place in the world (Kerr and Wollen, 2004, 174). It was then beneficial for the pre-revolutionary administrations not to encourage the creation of a national Cuban culture for several reasons: fiscally, the government would have to increase spending on the development of cultural institutions have, the training formation of artists, and most importantly, the education of a population that had high rates of illiteracy and poverty, particularly in rural areas. Further, the creation of a national culture could have encouraged an independent Cuba, intolerant of U.S. ambassadors meddling in Cuban politics.²⁵

Culture was thus reduced to a combination of American popular culture and European high culture for the upper classes in Havana, with danzones and other traditional Cuban music lacking presence in the radio stations. As mentioned before, it can be argued that Benny Moré and other 1950s singers were profoundly Cuban in their performances and engagement with society - and thus very popular among the population. These entertainers, however, needed to adopt elements of the American “glitz,” big band culture and a widespread decadence in order to attract wealthier audiences.²⁶ Moreover, admission rates to performances by “El Benny” Moré were prohibitively expensive for the large majority of the Cuban population. Alfredo Guevara has summarized well the extent of American cultural infiltration:

“Las universidades norteamericanas servían de complemento obligado en la educación, y las dobles sesiones en las escuelas privadas presuponían una en lengua inglesa. Los films y los músicos norteamericanos, los pocket-books y esa nueva formula literaria, los comics o muñequitos, pasaron a saturar la educación, y las pantallas, las victrioas, las

²⁵Events taking place after the revolution confirm that the intimate relationship and the identification which the upper classes felt with the U.S. and their intrusion in Cuban politics and economy was not approved by the large majority of the population. Perhaps one of the most illustrative examples was the nationalization of foreign assets through laws such as the Agrarian Reform Law of 1959 and the Nationalization of Law of 1960. For more information refer to “Cuba. Nationalization Law. July 6,1960” in *The American Journal of International Law* 55.3 (July, 1961): 822-24.

²⁶Henken argues that Benny Moré also significantly influenced the development of rock and roll and other types of music in the United States, but this is an isolated argument (2006, 191).

librerías y los puestos de revistas se llenaron de material made in USA” (Guevara, 1998, 155).²⁷

By contrast, notes Guevara, Cuban culture was deliberately ignored:

“Las costumbres cubanas, los modos de hablar nacionales y hasta el vestir y el comer según nuestros hábitos y tradiciones, quedaron relegados a la categoría de ‘antigüedades,’ y en el orden de la cultura, las formas más sentidas de la expresión nacional, la música y la danza, estuvieron a punto de desaparecer y quedaron sujetas a las deformaciones más vulgares so pretexto de supuestas ‘estilizaciones’” (Guevara, 1998, 155).²⁸

II. ENTER THE REVOLUTION

The sad state of the cultural institutions and the lack of promotion of a national culture before 1959 changed dramatically with the advent of the revolution on January 1, 1959. The actions taken by the new government upon taking power were illustrative of their priorities regarding not only culture, but also the general policy with which the government was planning to operate. Within 83 days of the revolutionary government being in power, the ICAIC²⁹ was

²⁷North American universities served as forced complement to [Cuban] education, and the double sessions in private schools presupposed one of them to be imparted in the English language. American music and films, pocket-books and that new literary formula, the comics, saturated the education system, and the television screens, jukeboxes, book stores and magazine stands were filled with material made in the U.S.

²⁸Cuban customs, or national ways of speaking and even dress and eating conventions, following our habits and traditions, were relegated to the category of ‘antiques,’ and in the cultural sphere, the most relevant forms of national expression such as music and dance were on the brink of disappearing, finally being subjected to the most vulgar deformations disguised as ‘stylization.’

²⁹ Instituto Cubano del Arte y la Industria Cinematográficos. The formation of ICAIC constituted an important cultural policy development not only for the film industry in the island, but also for music through the formation of the Grupo de Experimentación Sonora del ICAIC or Group for Sound Experimentation of ICAIC. This was a largely autonomous body, even during the Quinquenio Gris. For more information refer to www.cubacine.cult.cu

created, and within only four months, on April 28, 1959, *Casa de las Américas*³⁰ was also created under the direction of Haydée Santamaría³¹.

In addition, the National Cuban Ballet was finally reorganized in 1959 with the support of the Cuban government. The revolutionary government's commitment to maintaining the National Cuban Ballet has not failed since, making it one of the most important ballet corps in the world today, and a standard-bearer for Cuban "soft power" abroad.³² Fidel Castro and the rest of the revolutionary government knew the importance of art for the nation they were creating. In his speech to Cuban intellectuals, *Palabras a los intelectuales*³³ He argued that the status of the arts was going to change in Cuba. It had to: since the revolution had altered the political and

³⁰ The institution known as Casa de las Américas was founded by the new revolutionary government on April 28, 1959 through Law 299. The first president of this institution was Haydée Santamaría Cuadrado, one of the most significant figures in the creation of a socially relevant creative production in Cuba. The current president is the internationally known writer Roberto Fernández Retamar. For more information refer to www.casadelasAméricas.com

³¹ Haydée Santamaría was one of the two female members who took part in the Moncada Barracks assault in Santiago de Cuba on July 26th 1953. Her brother, Abel Santamaría was brutally murdered during the assault and she was imprisoned for a brief period of time. Her role as a leader of Casa de las Américas was central to the development of socially conscious music not only in Cuba, but also throughout Latin America (Hart Santamaría, 2005, np). One of the most visible examples of her great contribution to the formation of a movement throughout the region was the organization of Encuentro Internacional de la Canción Protesta (International Encounter for Protest Song) in 1973. It was during this event that Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez performed for the first time, but most importantly, this Encuentro brought together and provided support for socially conscious artist throughout the region.

³² The idea of "soft power" was first advanced by American political theorist Joseph Nye, and has continued to be a central concept in international theory and political science. Nye argues that a nation requires not only conventional forces (armament and fighting bodies), also called "hard power" in the international realm in order to acquire hegemony. He suggests that a nation also needs "soft power" in order to win allies in the international stage, namely, cultural hegemony. This feature would include active promotion of the most attractive features of the nation's society, geography, social accomplishments and cultural or artistic features. For further information see Nye's initial work "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power" (1990).

³³ The speech that became known as *Palabras a los intelectuales* (or Words to the Intellectuals) was given by Fidel Castro in June 1961 during a series of meetings with some of the most representative figures of the Cuban intellectual realm to discuss both their involvement in the revolution and the expectations the new revolutionary government had of them. The complete speech can be found at the Cuban Ministry of Culture website www.min.cult.cu

social structure of the island, it was only logical it would also alter the role of the arts (Castro, 1961, np), since these serve as a reflection and a critique of the social and political situation of any nation, whether this is consciously or unconsciously done by the artists. Alfredo Guevara, director and founder of ICAIC has argued that “the idea or ambition was that those first images of the triumphant revolution were not lost; the faces of its heroes, of those who had starred in the guerrilla warfare; and the first actions of an entire population and their leaders who started a process such as a triumphant Revolution” (Guevara, 1998, 49).

As a result, while one of the objectives was to create art that was relevant to the Cuban population at that time (Castro, 1961, np), another objective was to record the process of the revolution and the massive conquests it had achieved in a very short period of time. This last objective was challenged in the first massive conflict the revolution had to face in the cultural realm. The first years of the revolution, although the government was heavily supportive of the arts community in general, were not without problems. Perhaps the most relevant of them all was fueled by a film known as *P. M.*³⁴ and the later cancellation of the magazine *Lunes de Revolución*. These two events were significant and are relevant to this thesis because they influenced cultural policy in Cuba for the next fifty years, as well as served as the basis for the most emblematic (and misunderstood) speech ever given about the subject in Cuba, known as *Palabras a los intelectuales* (Castro, 1961, np).

P. M. failed to fulfill one of the central objectives, namely, to record the achievements of the young revolution. Released in 1961, the short documentary showed nightlife in Havana much

³⁴ *P. M.* was a small documentary by Alberto “Saba” Cabrera Infante and Orlando Jiménez Leal. It did make it to the television through *Lunes de Revolución* (headed by Carlos Franqui and Guillermo Cabrera Infante). The problem was that the ICAIC did not want to show the documentary in the movie theatre, and Cabrera Infante disregarded the situation and went ahead with its showcase on television. This is one of the reasons why *Lunes de Revolución* was consequently removed from circulation during this period (Fornet, 2007, np).

as it had been before 1959 (with alcohol flowing, widespread poverty, and use of marijuana), an image that the cultural institutions of the time, inflamed with the revolutionary spirit, were not keen on having displayed. While the film was shown to the public on one occasion, Alfredo Guevara - then director of ICAIC- was not supportive of the film, and it has been said that even physical violence was not excluded from the discussion, such was the controversy surrounding the film (Guevara, 1998, 140). Several sectors of the artistic community in Cuba started questioning the methods of ICAIC and most importantly, the government policy on cultural production. Out of these questions arose during Fidel Castro's speech *Palabras a los intelectuales*.

In the speech, emblematic to both detractors and defenders of Cuban cultural policy, Fidel Castro argued that culture was in fact a right of the Cuban population, but that nevertheless the government also had a right in determining what the population could or could not see in terms of artistic production because the most important need was for all to defend the revolution. It was also from this speech that the words "Within the revolution everything, against the revolution nothing" (Castro, 1961, np) were taken; words which have been taken out of context by many scholars and applied to Cuban policy in general (Navarro, 2002, 188.³⁵ One of the best explanations regarding this line of the speech is provided by Alfredo Guevara. He states:

"El texto exacto es "Dentro de la revolución todo, contra la revolución nada." No significa en español lo mismo con que dentro. En el marco de la revolución podían estar, están, otras concepciones ideológicas y religiosas, no es concebible en cambio y espero

³⁵ While there are a number of commentators such as Navarro (2002, 188) who argue for the general applicability of this portion of the speech, their interpretation must be contested. *Palabras a los Intelectuales* must be analyzed in the context of government interactions with the artistic and intellectual community in the island, and not as a general guide for issues ranging from economic policy to international political engagements.

*que se comprenda que dentro no puede estar la contra-revolución. Por eso Dentro todo es posible; contra no lo sería, no lo es. (Guevara, 1998, 44)*³⁶

It is, then, under this framework that the rest of the Cuban cultural policy was created, a set of guidelines (and limits) in which the artists sought to enjoy all possible freedoms of expression, without opposing the revolution.³⁷ Whether some authors argue that there is a constricting element to the definition, Fidel Castro merely provided the scope in which the cultural creation in Cuba was to develop, a conceptualization that does not differ much from cultural legislation enacted in any other country.³⁸ Art by definition seeks to challenge the frameworks in which governmental institutions function. Furthermore, while through this sort of legislation Cuban government attempts to protect a legacy that has become part and parcel of the Cuban identity after fifty years of revolution, it can be argued there is no need for it. Artists, even those critical of some revolutionary policies, tend to remain “within” a general policy frame. For instance, the social policies of the revolution, the adoption of the arts as a right and not a privilege, and the extremely high priority status which children enjoy on the island are not challenged by any socially conscious artists. If anything, most of them want to further develop the revolution through the improvement and expansion of these programs.

³⁶ “The exact text reads “Inside the revolution everything, against the revolution nothing.” In Spanish, “with” does not mean the same than “inside.” Within the framework of the revolution could be, and are, many other ideological and religious ideologies, what is not conceivable conversely is, and I hope it will be understood, that counter-revolution cannot be “inside.” That is why “inside” all is possible, against would not be, it is not.”

³⁷ In fact, it was not a limitation imposed on the artists. Years before, more specifically in 1959, Virgilio Piñera, one of the most acclaimed playwrights and artists in Cuba, had stated in a public message sent to Fidel that “writers wanted to cooperate shoulder to shoulder with the revolution” and asked to be included in the political and social decision-making taking place on the island. (Fornet, 2001, np)

³⁸ Eric Nuzum’s book “Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America” is of mandatory reference for those interested in cultural policy in censorship in the United States.

III. THE GREY FIVE YEARS

Although the general ideas for the implementation of cultural policy in Cuba since 1961 have been positive, there have been several problems in the way the government and cultural institutions dealt with the artists. One of the most famous time periods was the so-called *Quinquenio Gris*³⁹ or Grey Five Years. After *Palabras a los intelectuales* and the storm which the documentary *P. M.* unleashed, the *Quinquenio Gris* of the first half of the 1970s was extremely important in terms of the development (or regression) of cultural policy in Cuba. During the roughly five years that this period lasted, artistic creation was stifled as a result of perceived counter-revolutionary activities on the part of some of the members of the artistic community in Cuba. Also during this stage, the Soviet notion of “socialist realism”⁴⁰ infiltrated the Cuban creative realm. With the Cuban cultural institutions adopting this viewpoint, the artistic production in the island was endangered of becoming stale. This was, ironically, something that neither Fidel Castro nor Che Guevara had wanted for the arts in the island. Nevertheless, the national trauma following the death of Che Guevara in 1967, the constant aggressions originating in the United States, and the increasing dependency upon the Soviet

³⁹ Term coined by Cuban writer Ambrosio Fornet to describe a period of five years in which authors in Cuba as important as Antón Arrufat and Heberto Padilla (probably the most notorious cases, taking place in 1968) were restricted from publishing and condemned to menial jobs. Ethnographer Pedro Sarduy for example, was not able to publish for over ten years (Fornet, 2001, np).

⁴⁰ “Socialist realism” is described by Robert Anchor as based on a concrete socialist perspective. Consequently, socialist realism employs this perspective to describe the sources working towards socialism from the inside (1980, 288).

Union, had created a guarded political climate in the island, which undoubtedly influenced cultural policy.⁴¹

The Grey Five Years began when works by Heberto Padilla and Antón Arrufat⁴² were awarded prizes by UNEAC⁴³ but were published with notes advising the readers of the counter-revolutionary character of the authors and content of the works. Eventually, the Padilla books were banned and he was imprisoned for a brief period of time. He was released shortly after, as a result of a letter signed by writers in North America and Europe sent to Fidel Castro outlining the displeasure of the artistic community with the actions that had been taken against these authors (Fornet, 2001, np).

Even though Padilla's collection of poetry *Fuera de Juego* in itself was not a counter-revolutionary work (although several of the poems themselves were very critical of the use of metaphors and analogies), the previous actions of Padilla linking him to Cabrera Infante from *Lunes de Revolución* were the most "incriminatory" actions which led to his work being deemed inappropriate for the Cuban population. The Padilla case has been ever since a very important chapter of the progression of cultural policy. Since the end of the *Quinquenio Gris* in 1976 with the creation of the Ministry of Culture under the direction of Armando Hart, no other artist has been so mistreated.⁴⁴

⁴¹ To add stress to the new revolutionary government, the failed 10 Million Ton Sugar Harvest of 1971, and the siege mentality that developed as a result of constant U.S. aggressions. For example, the memory of the explosion of the ship La Coubre in 1960 were fresh in Cuban minds.

⁴² *Fuera de Juego* and *Los Siete Contra Tebas* respectively. Padilla won the UNEAC prize for Literature while Arrufat won the same prize for Theatre (Fornet, 2001, np).

⁴³ UNEAC is a social organization with cultural goals founded on August 22 1961 by the National Poet of Cuba, Nicolás Guillén. It has played a central part as a haven for artists and creators such as Lezama Lima and Roberto Fernández Retamar. For more information about this institution refer to www.uneac.org.cu

⁴⁴ This of course does not mean that there has not been any censorship in Cuba ever since. It has. This will be analyzed in later chapters of the thesis.

During this period of time one of the most relevant bans was implemented; one that has influenced the development of at least three generations of artists in Cuba: the banning of rock and roll music and particularly, the Beatles. The ban extended to such lengths that youth resembling the image of rockers or hippies were sent to UMAPs⁴⁵ alongside others also perceived to have counter-revolutionary tendencies, such as religious leaders.⁴⁶ Renowned singers such as Pablo Milanés were also sent to these units. Moreover, Silvio Rodríguez, one of the foremost representatives of Cuban music inside and outside the island encountered troubles when he declared on television that he was influenced by the music of the Beatles (, Kirk and Padura, 2001, 7).

To understand these policies and actions undertaken by the Cuban revolutionary government one must take into account two variables: the Marxist viewpoint of many of the members of the revolutionary government, and the siege mentality in terms of Cuba's relation with the United States aggression that was prevalent during those years - and it still is today among some of the oldest Communist Party members. Orthodox Marxism argues that culture should be put to the service of society and should not exist or be judged based solely on its aesthetic value. Therefore, members of the Cuban government ascribing to this position argued that rock and roll music coming from the United States was yet another symptom of a decadent society that had absolutely nothing to do with the revolutionary values they were trying to instill in the Cuban youth. In addition, these cultural expressions brought memories of past times when Cuba and particularly Havana was the playground of wealthy Americans and when Cuban

⁴⁵ Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción (or Military Units to Aid Production). Their existence lasted for only three years, between 1965 and 1968. "The UMAP housed persons rounded up as vagrants, counterrevolutionaries, and so-called deviants, homosexuals, juvenile delinquents, and religious followers, including Catholics, Baptists, and Jehovah's Witnesses" (Bunk, 1994, 135).

⁴⁶ Jaime Ortega, current Archbishop of Havana in Cuba, was one of the youth sent to the UMAP for his religious involvement.

culture had no place. This understanding was, of course, biased. American rock and roll artists like Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters and British performers like the Beatles were revolutionary in their own way, and significantly influenced the civil rights movement in the United States and elsewhere in the world. Unfortunately, this was not the view of Cuban officials during the early years of the revolutionary period, who viewed them as representatives of a decadent western imperialist culture. The Cuban government also encouraged cultural production that served a purpose for the national population, much in the way that Trotsky encouraged it. Authors have argued that the main purpose was to steer the artists towards the creation of propaganda instead of art, but this is also a biased assertion. When art serves a purpose in society (educates, creates awareness regarding social or political issues, etc...), it should not be instantly labeled as propaganda. Doing so will only project the notion that art should be only valuable in terms of aesthetics, which is a rather shallow conceptualization of the term. Instead, art should reflect diverging opinions, it should depart from the standpoint of the individual artist while at the same time avoiding repetition of the political opinion of a specific party or government. Regarding this subject Trotsky argued:

“Our Marxist conception of the objective social dependence and social utility of art, when translated into the language of politics, does not at all mean a desire to dominate art by means of decrees and orders. It is not true that we regard only that art as new and revolutionary which speaks of the worker, and it is nonsense to say that we demand that the poets should describe inevitably a factory chimney, or the uprising against capital! Of course the new art cannot but place the struggle of the proletariat in the center of its attention. But the plough of the new art is not limited to numbered strips. On the contrary, it must plough the entire field in all directions” (Trotsky, 1972, 31).

IV. “LA ERA ESTA PARIENDO UN CORAZON”

In the midst of this political, social and cultural unrest the *Nueva Trova* Movement - literally “New Troubadours” - appeared. Although this movement was one of the most salient in

the region, especially during the 1970s and onwards, it was not the only one. In fact, *La Nueva Trova* in Cuba was heavily influenced by American rock and roll, and *Nueva Canción* or *Nuevo Canto* in Latin America, especially coming from Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil. This “new song” movement was exceptionally important throughout Latin America. One of the most salient features of all these movements was that they were arising in places with changing institutions, often in the midst of social unrest: the revolution in Cuba, the Vietnam War in the United States, and the dictatorships that had taken hold of Chile and Argentina for instance. Music thus arose as a voice for people that could not substantially become involved in the larger political processes through traditional means.⁴⁷ While in Cuba the unrest was caused by an event that largely benefited the masses, it was unrest and change nevertheless, and Cuban youth saw a way of expressing their feelings (whether of support or criticism of the government) through song.

The Latin American *Nueva Canción*⁴⁸ movement was very influential in the development of the style that would characterize the *Nueva Trova* in Cuba for decades to come. Singers like Violeta Parra and Víctor Jara in Chile performed without the glitz and shine that was characteristic of the United States mainstream performers, and that had become popular in Cuba before the revolution. Moreover, the music carried a social meaning that went beyond the idea of “entertainment for the sake of entertainment,” and sought to become a voice for the concerns of the population. This way of making art caught the attention of the new institutions arising in Cuba, most importantly *Casa de las Américas*. In fact, Casa can be said to have provided the

⁴⁷ The reasons could be several, especially when looking at the countries in Latin America: a largely powerless population with little education and access to decision-making, for example.

⁴⁸ *Nueva Canción* was the name given to the movement in Chile particularly prior to the 1973 coup of General Augusto Pinochet. After the coup (and the murder of Víctor Jara) the movement was renamed *Nuevo Canto*, partly to avoid persecution (Tumas-Cerna, 1992, 146)

official and most important sponsorship of the movement of “protest music”⁴⁹ in Latin America as a whole, and not only in Cuba. For example, in 1967 the *Encuentro de la Canción Protesta* was sponsored by *Casa de las Américas*, and it was in this event that Noel Nicola, Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez sang for the first time to a large audience.

The governments also came to the realization during this time of the importance that song could have for the population, and of the ways the population could be mobilized through music. The case of Víctor Jara is one of the most salient examples of a government acknowledging the meaning that music had for the population and acting in consequence. Jara was one of the leaders of *Nueva Canción* movement in Chile, and a supporter of the Allende government, a fact that he made no effort to conceal in his music. The day after the coup in 1973 Jara was arrested and tortured, and some days later his body was found in a stadium, later named after him (Neustad, 2004, 129). What made the government pay so much attention to a musician if his music was of no social or political value? Musicians have much more exposure to the general public than scholars or politicians, and their message can carry past the barriers of ignorance, lack of education and illiteracy, thus making it the perfect tool for the leftist movements arising in Latin America at the time. Furthermore, the widespread use of metaphor and simile in *Canto Nuevo* and *Nueva Trova* allowed for the full expression of the artist while at the same time giving space for the listener to become involved in the song, and thus in the social and political process.

This is also the case of Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez, the two artists we will be paying the most attention to in this chapter. After their initial exposure in 1967 through *Casa de las Américas*, the Grey Years of heavy government censorship came about, and both singers encountered obstacles to perform their music. In the cases of Milanés and Rodríguez they were

⁴⁹ “Protest Music” does not translate literally from Spanish as music that protests a feature in government or any other aspect of society or politics. Instead, it describes music that serves a social purpose and carries a social meaning, whether directly or metaphorically.

finally accepted by the institutions and developed into public raconteurs, representing the interests of the people of Cuba, as well as the revolutionary struggle of the current government. The process, however, was a long one.

Silvio Rodríguez was expelled from different television stations because of statements relating to his music which were not particularly approved of by the government. He stated his music was influenced by the Beatles during a time in Cuba (Kirk and Padura, 2001, 8) when rock and roll and all other music coming from the United States was viewed as an escapist strategy belonging to indulgent capitalists and bourgeois individuals - who were not part of the socialist society being ferociously developed in Cuba at the moment. This situation caused the singer difficulties in terms of accessibility to venues,⁵⁰ as well as recording and other essentials to create and distribute an artist's music.⁵¹ In the case of Pablo Milanés, he was one of those sent to the UMAP as a result of his appearance and the type of music he usually listened to. However, he remained there only for a short period of time.

In time, and with the influence of Haydée Santamaría and *Casa de las Américas*, the music of these two artists and several others like Noel Nicola soon became not only acceptable, but also central to the new revolutionary government. Music by many young people not only supported the revolution and the leftist processes in Latin America inspired by it, but also created political alliances with many other countries in times of distress. For example, after the 1973

⁵⁰ This situation came about during a time in which venues in Cuba were very few, as a result of government closures. The rationale behind closing the venues was that these places constituted remainders of the decadent night life of pre-revolutionary Havana, a night life controlled by the American Mafia with the blessings of Meyer Lansky and notably then-President Fulgencio Batista (Moore, 2007, 34)

⁵¹ It has been the case in Cuba since the revolution, partly because the cultural venues until very recently were universally government-owned, that access to recording studios and markets was rather hard to obtain for many artists. This was largely because the government had only limited resources to allocate towards cultural production, and thus it was forced to prioritize, leaving many talented artists outside of the markets and the public in the island and abroad. This situation and its current developments will be analyzed in upcoming chapters.

coup in Chile, Pablo Milanés' song *Yo Pisaré las Calles Nuevamente*⁵² joined not only the Cuban population but all of Latin America in condemning the murder of President Salvador Allende in La Moneda presidential palace.

*“Yo pisaré las calles nuevamente
de lo que fue Santiago ensangrentada
y en una hermosa plaza liberada
me detendré a llorar por los ausentes.”*⁵³

One of the main features of Cuban socially conscious music is youth's involvement, whether to praise the government or to criticize it. During the 1960s and 1970s Cuban youth played still a central role in the process of creating a new country and a new society from virtually nothing, and they were extremely active in this process. This is one of the reasons why, even though some of the songs of Silvio and Pablo (as they are usually known) do point out faults in the system either implicitly or explicitly, most of them praise the revolutionary process and the rejuvenation or “awakening” of Cuban society after years under the influence of the United States. These years were reflected in songs appropriated by the youth like *Canción del Elegido*,⁵⁴ which in theory is a eulogy to one of the leading representatives of the Cuban struggle, Abel Santamaría, but that fully represents the political involvement of a generation that fought to change the status quo in the nation and bring down the Batista dictatorship. In the song Silvio describes the last time he saw *el elegido* or ‘chosen one’

⁵² I Will Walk the Streets Once More. Included in the album titled Pablo Milanés (1976). In the same album relevant songs such as Salvador Allende en Su Combate por la Vida (Salvador Allende in its Struggle for Life) are also included. For further reference to Pablo Milanés' discography refer to <http://www.milanespablo.com/esp.html>

⁵³ I will walk on the streets once more/ of what was bloody Santiago [of Chile]/ and in a beautiful free plaza/ I will stop and cry for those departed.

⁵⁴ Song of the Chosen One. Included in the album Al final de Este Viaje (1978).

*“La última vez lo vi irse
entre humo y metralla contento y desnudo
Iba matando canalla,
con su cañón de futuro.”⁵⁵*

In this simple statement Silvio manages to encompass the acceptance of violence by his generation, the agreement that killing those opposed to the creation of a better and independent Cuba was acceptable, as long as it rid the country of the horrible situation in which it had been before, and finally the rejection of material goods that was one of the main tenets of “The New Man”⁵⁶ of Che Guevara, with his hopes for a bright future of the country.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, it can be argued that throughout the early years of the revolutionary process an ongoing and intimate relationship was successfully established between the Cuban government, the artists, and the rest of civil society. During this period in Cuba artists began both reflecting and influencing not only cultural policy, but also national and international political events, as exemplified through the works of Silvio and Pablo. In this way, they cemented their place as an active portion of Cuban civil society who, during these years, was so intimately linked with the political society.

Critics usually forget, when pointing out confrontations between the government and socially conscious artists as a way of illustrating the lack of commitment of the Cuban government to citizens’ input, that exchange of ideas and confrontation are building blocks of

⁵⁵ The last time I saw him leave/ among smoke and gunshots happy and naked/ he was killing scoundrels, / with his cannon made of future.

⁵⁶ Che Guevara argues that “to build communism, a new man must be created simultaneously with the material base. (...) In our society the youth and the Party play a big role. The former is important because it is the malleable clay with which the new man, without any of its previous defects, can be formed (Guevara, 1967, 22)

democracy. Furthermore, these actions evidence the existence of a strong civil society. Indeed, a lack of consensus only documents a weak civil society and citizen structure, and a strong economic class or social group which has succeeded in creating hegemony among the general population. This is clearly not the case in Cuba.

Socially conscious artists during the early revolutionary years established a tradition of social and civic discourse expressed through art that was to continue in the following and arguably most challenging years of the revolution. Artists' involvement in civil society activities emerges in times of social disruption in Latin America and in Cuba, and thus it was only natural that a continuation of this tradition became prominent in the years denominated as Special Period in Cuba, following the demise of the Soviet Union. It is during these 20 years of economic - and consequently social and political - disruptions that the political and social profile of socially conscious musicians resembled more closely the centrality which these artists had during the early years of the revolution. The following chapters will discuss the work and influence of socially conscious underground musicians emerging during this epoch.

CHAPTER 3. THE ONSET OF THE SPECIAL PERIOD IN CUBA: SOCIETY, ARTS AND GOVERNMENT

During the years following the *Quinquenio Gris* of the 1970s, Cuban youth felt increasingly distant from the revolutionary process. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s this section of the population - even if somewhat critical of new policies - was largely involved in political decision-making, and thus there was a vibrant interaction between civil and political society, a feature particularly visible through the involvement of youth in the cultural processes in the island such as the 1961 Literacy Campaign⁵⁷ and other programs designed to bring culture to Cuba's poorest and most marginalized sectors. However, starting in the 1980s, this traditional⁵⁸ involvement of youth in civic input declined. Several phenomena affected the slowdown in the traditional patterns of involvement, among them the increasing links to the Soviet Union (which warranted a more hierarchical mode of organizing society) and the fact that the leadership of the revolution became much less involved in grassroots governance.⁵⁹

Further, the 1980s in Cuba were nothing short of turbulent. The generation growing up during this period, including some of the most important *trovadores* of today's Cuba,

⁵⁷ Fidel Castro declared during Cuba's First Congress of the Municipal Council of Education: "Death to illiteracy will be the number one goal of 1961" (Bunck, 1994, 24). Indeed, 1961 was officially named The Year of Education by the revolutionary government. Thousands of students of at least 13 years of age formed the "literacy army" that effectively increased literacy around the country (Bunck, 1994, 25).

⁵⁸ Traditional involvement is understood in this thesis as input from civil society to political society through means such as membership in political parties, voting, etc. Nontraditional civil input includes social and political criticism through artistic creation.

⁵⁹ For instance, during the early years of the revolution, Fidel Castro was known for traveling the island in a jeep in order to gather information directly from the population regarding the actions the government needed to take. This method of direct governance suffered when the Cuban government became more closely allied with the Soviets and in many ways, depended on this support (LeoGrande, 2002, 357).

experienced the Mariel boatlift in 1980,⁶⁰ a deteriorating economy starting in 1985, soon to be followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and a consequent and dramatic decline in the Cuban economy (LeoGrande, 2002, 332), as well as the continuation and escalation of U.S.' aggression against the island.⁶¹ In short, youth growing up during the 1980s witnessed their country struggle to cope with a whirlwind of changes in a very short period of time. These challenges were significantly different for those experienced by youth in the first decade of the revolutionary process.

Youth, although not excluded from the political process on the island, failed to engage effectively in traditional ways of civil society input which the government promoted.⁶² Instead, Cuban youth employed the socially conscious musical tradition in order to express their ideas, and their concerns regarding the country and its leadership. Artistic means of expression became the main method either to criticize or support elements of the revolutionary process in Cuba, preferred over traditional methods of civil society input in the political process, such as involvement in political parties or voting. Cultural political engagement was preferred as a result of the level of identification the Cuban population (and Cuban youth specifically) felt towards the artists. Furthermore, this preference was a direct result of the importance of culture during

⁶⁰ 125, 000 Cubans left the island through the port of el Mariel between April 15th and October 31st, 1980 (de Miranda Parrondo, 2003, 71). The massive exodus created further separation between families in the Cuban community, not only geographically but also politically.

⁶¹ The Cuban government sent several reports to the United States government during the 1990s detailing acts of aggression against the island. Although the U.S. Interest Section in Havana has repeatedly denied the receipt of any notification, documents such as the Informe Sobre las Actividades Terroristas Contra Cuba (Report Regarding Terrorist Activities Against Cuba), list aggressions against the island such as October 1994 attack against the Guitart-Cayo Coco Hotel (Informe, 1998, np).

⁶² This situation was derived from a number of factors, including the economic situation under the Special Period, and the consequent disenchantment with the revolution. Nevertheless, the Cuban state encourages referenda and other methods in order to engage the population (and particularly youth) in the political process. Refer to Chapter 4 of this thesis for further analysis of these strategies.

the revolutionary period, a feature which granted artists great visibility in society and at the political level as a result.

Significantly, non-traditional means of civic involvement were fashioned by the revolutionary government's goals and education strategies. Revolutionary leaders like Fidel Castro and Che Guevara had consistently argued, often with the same vehemence that civic rights are supported in modern Western democracies, that culture was a right of the population. For instance, Article 8 of the 1976 Cuban Constitution guarantees the right of every Cuban to "education, culture and sports" (República de Cuba, np). The revolution thus set out to develop a culturally involved and aware population, partly with the goal of consolidating a strong sense of nationalism in the Cuban population. As a result, it was only logical for Cuban youth to employ the tools given to them in their struggle to modify the political, social and economic system of the island.

While art is never completely removed from the political and social realm, for the last thirty years it has gained a prominent place in Cuba as a result of the wide public interest it has harnessed. The Cuban population has had very little access to popular media from other parts of the world,⁶³ and thus it was -and remains - deeply in touch with art produced in the island. This grants the Cuban artists a large audience for their music, and arguably also provides them with a deeper commitment to address issues of interest to their public. Furthermore, as in any other country in the world, the majority of the population is more likely to attend a concert⁶⁴ than a

⁶³ The Cuban government controls media broadcasts in the island (Hansing, 2006, 65). The scramble for the control of information can be attributed to the siege mentality developed by the Cuban revolutionary government as a result of constant United States aggression on the island.

⁶⁴ Even more so in Cuba given the very low prices that cultural events command. Accessibility to cultural events is one of the most important commitments of the revolutionary government towards the diffusion of culture in Cuba.

political rally if given the choice. This obvious preference allows the artist to successfully communicate their message to a wide audience.

The relevance of songs stemming from socially conscious musicians reaches the population in ways the political leadership is unable to. For the last thirty years, the government has become removed from the daily struggles of the population, while the artists (many of whom are in touch with this reality on a daily basis given their “underground” capacity, and their lack of access to foreign markets and thus dollars) have gained a deep knowledge, and thus sing about it with a relevancy which political speeches lack.⁶⁵

The 1990s furthered the alienation of Cuban youth regarding the political processes taking place in the island. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 meant the loss of a safety net for the Cuban economy and most importantly, the loss of a market for its goods. From the 1960s and until the mid-1980s Cuba received a large amount of funds and subsidized products from the Soviets.⁶⁶ To a large extent, this was due to shared ideological goals, although just as important was the strategic position of the island in the Caribbean Sea, only 90 miles away from the United

⁶⁵ One perfect example to illustrate how difficult it is for youth to have their concerns taken seriously by the political leadership was the confrontation between UCI student Eliecer Ávila and Ricardo Alarcón de Quesada, President of the National Assembly, on February 2008. In it, students had the rare opportunity to face the political leadership directly and ask difficult questions, which Alarcón de Quesada was obviously unprepared to answer. For further details see the eleven parts at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=7540047147367608928&hl=es> One of the main problems is that the leadership in the government has grown old, and is no longer in touch with the concerns of the youth. In recent years Raúl Castro realized this problem and proposed that no individual could hold political office in Cuba for longer than ten years. (Hart, 2011, np)

⁶⁶ “From 1962 to 1974 Cuban trade with socialist countries was in the red with the USSR holding about 60% of the total trade deficit. This in spite of the fact that the USSR bought Cuban sugar at prices usually higher than the world market price and sold oil to the island at prices lower than the international price. In this period, trade deficits were covered with Soviet loans to be repaid within 12 years at an interest below 4 percent. In addition, the USSR granted Cuba development loans with a 25-year repayment period and a rate of interest of 2 to 2.5 percent” (Mesa-Lago, 1987, 174).

States.⁶⁷ Indeed, by 1962 the trade with the Soviet Union, negligible before 1959, had increased to represent 49% of all Cuban trade. Furthermore, starting in 1974 and extending until the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, 68.8% of all trade was with the Soviets (LeoGrande,2002, 333). The loss of the most significant trade partner of which the island was heavily dependent resulted in a huge blow to the country's economy: the Cuban government was left with no market to sell its sugar⁶⁸ and no tourist industry.⁶⁹ Thus, they were forced to adopt radical economic measures in order to adapt to the situation and keep the economy afloat.⁷⁰ Among the most radical programs adopted was the opening of the economy to foreign investment, particularly in the area of tourism but also in other sectors of the economy⁷¹ (LeoGrande, 2002, 344). The economy was thus re-oriented towards the creation of a new tourist industry in Cuba, something which started in the late 1980s. Further policies adopted during the Special Period with lasting consequences

⁶⁷ Cuba's geopolitical situation was of great interest for the Soviet Union, since it was the only outpost from where they could effectively target the United States (Nijman, 1992, 687).

⁶⁸ One of the Cuban government's main objectives in 1959 was to diversify an economy that had been largely reliant on tourism and sugar to survive. Beyond the United States, Cuba had developed no markets for its products, and the cost to ship sugar to other parts of the world was extremely high, given the low prices sugar was fetching on the international market (LeoGrande, 2002, 342). The Cuban market had to deal with problems such as the lack of industrial skilled workers, since most of them had left after the nationalization of industries, as well as the lack of fuel on the island. The Soviet Union resolved these problems, paying higher than average prices for Cuba's sugar, and providing subsidized fuel, as well as guaranteeing access to universities in the Eastern Bloc to provide training for industrial workers and engineers who would be working in Cuba (LeoGrande, 2002, 342). However, no parts for industrial production were made in Cuba, and fuel was imported. Therefore, when the Soviet Union collapsed, Cuba needed to return to the international market and pay higher prices for fuel and spare parts, while at the same time maintain social programs for the Cuban population.

⁶⁹ Tourism started re-developing in Cuba after the collapse of the Soviet Union after decades of neglect, since it was seen as a remnant of pre-1959 decadence (Ritter, 2002, 110).

⁷⁰ One of the main sources of legitimacy for the Cuban government is the provision of social services for all Cubans, as promised by the revolution in 1959. Therefore, the Cuban government needs a substantial source of revenue and a relatively healthy economy in order to keep these social programs functioning.

⁷¹ Through a constitutional amendment the Cuban government allowed for further foreign investment on the island, while holding at least 51% of the shares of all investment in order to exert more control over business decisions and protect natural resources. In 1995, 100% foreign ownership was allowed in some industries (LeoGrande, 2002, 330).

among Cuban youth and the artist community alike were the legalization of the dollar and subsequent implementation of a dual currency system in the island in 1993 (LeoGrande, 2002, 352).⁷²

While the new measures fueled a modest recovery after the massive economic, social and political blow to Cuba that was the collapse of the Soviet Union, they also contributed to social and political unrest, and affected wide sections of the population, of which the Cuban youth was one of the most severely impacted.

To those growing up with the revolutionary discourse of equality and pride in the social achievements of the revolution, it was challenging to face the hardships brought about by the reforms of the 1990s. More than anything, it was difficult to cope with the increasing income gap resulting from the introduction of the dollar and the encouragement of tourism. Nevertheless, the dissociation between government discourse and the reality on the streets was one of the main causes for disillusionment with the system among Cuban youth. Indeed, access to the dollar currency became the main determinant of social status, and the consumer items that could be purchased with the currency became status symbols among the general population (Eckstein qtd in Kapcia,80).⁷³ The government was reticent to accept this reality, however, and in its rhetoric emphasized moral incentives and sacrifices for the revolution that Che Guevara had developed

⁷² The dollar had been circulating on the island prior to its legalization, as a result of remittances from Cubans living in the United States to their families still residing in Cuba. The Cuban government decided to legalize the currency in order to tax it, and at the same time control the flow of cash into the island (LeoGrande, 2002, 353). The legalization of the dollar had several unwanted social ramifications, which included the creation of different classes in the Cuban system: while some sectors of the population (mostly white, reflecting the predominant ethnicity of Cubans living outside of the island) had access to dollars, the large majority did not (Eckstein, 2003, 288).

⁷³ The appearance of an income gap in the Cuban social fabric was indeed a traumatic experience. No major socioeconomic differences had existed among the population for the previous thirty years. Furthermore, one of the most important bases for governmental discourse and legitimacy had been social equality.

years earlier with his romantic - yet impractical - characterization of the “Hombre Nuevo” or “New Man” (Guevara, 1967, 22). In short, the Special Period deepened even more the already existing disconnect between government discourse and the situation of everyday Cubans, and further impeded involvement of Cuban youth in the traditional means of civic input.

While the government-society reality gap was perceived during the decade by the large majority of the population in Cuba, it was youth that suffered the most. The generation that grew up during the 1980s and 1990s - when the revolution was firmly established in power, and which had experienced no other society or political system - was particularly sensitive to a governmental institution that not only was not in touch with their desires (arguably, as they should) but that also cradled a growing class of “big fish” or “cronies” in governmental positions,⁷⁴ thus furthering the income gap between sectors of the population (Eckstein, 2003, 119).⁷⁵ In response to the overwhelming situation, youth in Cuba turned to a tradition that had grown up with the revolution - although it had not always been approved by the government - to make their voices and opinions heard: socially conscious music.⁷⁶

Socially conscious musicians in Cuba can be frequently characterized as belonging to the cultural “underground.” Although this is not a defining feature of the movement, this thesis will concentrate on artists who, in their relationship with the Cuban government and in their style of music, can be categorized as such. According to Eme 13, a Puerto Rican scholar and activist

⁷⁴ Pinchos in Cuban slang.

⁷⁵ In particular these sectors were linked to the military structures in Cuba. This makes sense when one realizes that they are not only the ones that have proven repeatedly their loyalty to the government, but also are the ones who keep the economy going to a large extent. In fact, a large number of successful Cuban-owned enterprises are controlled by the Cuban army (Xianglin, 2007, 99).

⁷⁶ I will refer to this type of music in this thesis as “socially conscious” and “protest” without distinguishing between them. ‘Protest music’ refers only to the name that was given to the Nueva Trova movement during the 1970s and does not signal criticism against the Cuban government necessarily.

researching hip hop in the Caribbean, the underground is the lack of market, the lack of recording studios interested in recording and consequently selling the product that the artist has produced, the lack of distribution strategies (Pedrero Mariol, 2008). In Cuba, nevertheless, the term can be interpreted in a slightly different fashion. Artists may be extremely famous on the island and even abroad, as is the case with several of the case studies presented in this thesis. However, and despite their popularity, the Cuban government chooses, as a means of censorship, not to record their albums, or to provide any type of support for the creation of their music. It is not difficult for the Cuban government to take this course of action since they own and control the majority of the recording studios in Cuba, as well as promotional channels such as radio and television, and thus they can effectively ban an artist simply by refusing studio recording time, or access to these channels of distribution. The censorship is present, yet subtle.

It must be stressed that a “ban” in Cuba implies the government’s refusal to participate in the creation or distribution of a specific type of music, or to support a specific group. In any other nation, denying access to a recording studio would be seen as a lack of interest on the part of the owners, precisely because there is the possibility of alternative means of diffusion of the music or other forms of artistic expression. Furthermore, Cuba is hardly the only country in the world to apply some level of censorship to politically conscious music.⁷⁷

During the 1990s in Cuba there was - and to a large extent there still exists - a monopoly of ownership over the means of production, marketing and distribution of music, and there was no interest in sponsoring certain groups which used a different discourse from that employed by the government. Therefore, it became increasingly difficult to transmit music to the population without support for the artists through established channels of production and distribution.

⁷⁷ For examples of how governmental censorship is used in countries such as the United States, refer to this thesis introduction.

However, censorship was less than effective. In fact, it can be argued that the reality portrayed in their songs was best transmitted to the population through alternative channels developed by the artists themselves. The population had been largely excluded from the political process in the latter years of the revolution as a result of reduced means of civilian input, and so have been the musicians, who are clearly part of the population themselves. This is precisely why the concept of analyzing the work of socially conscious underground musicians is relevant in the Cuban context: it not only portrays a side of Cuba's society and political process that is usually hidden from the international realm as a result of wide misinterpretations from both sides of the political divide that plagues analytical discourse associated with Cuba, but also illustrates what the government is willing to do and allow, and opens channels for civilian input and creativity in the island. Indeed, underground musicians have reinforced their position as organic intellectuals in a strong emerging civil society.

The idea of the organic intellectual was created by Antonio Gramsci, most clearly in his "Prison Notebooks." The concept develops the Marxist idea of the vanguard of the proletariat⁷⁸ and identifies leaders of different social groups as members of the particular strata of society they guide. Gramsci argued that the organic intellectual could be identified through membership in a particular sector of society, and also that they would guide the interests of this group by representing them as their own (Gramsci, 1992, 5).

In Cuba, underground, socially conscious musicians have acted as organic intellectuals for the last thirty years, and their role in society has expanded as a result of the lack of relevance

⁷⁸ Marx argued that the vanguard of the proletariat would be formed by people with a more educated background than the alienated masses of workers that would form the Revolution (Barany, 1997). In practice, Lenin argued that "no dictatorship can be organized in such a way as to enable the whole class to exercise direct leadership of society, thus the function of guiding society in the name of the class ... is performed by its political vanguard" (qtd. in Barany, 1997, 11).

and inability to deliver of traditional channels for civilian input in the Cuban political process. Before the 1980s the organic intellectual was effectively represented by the political leadership and society, particularly youth, a situation that changed dramatically - as explained above - during the late 1980s and 1990s.

Artists who serve the role of organic intellectuals among Cuban youth share, but are not defined by, certain characteristics: all of these artists are Cuban, and a large number of them refuse to reside elsewhere. Their discourse is always localized on the island and specifically in the challenges that Cubans face in their everyday lives. Most importantly, they all have encountered a certain level of opposition from the most conservative sectors of the government, and faced censorship during their careers. Regardless, they have all found alternative channels to produce, distribute and perform their music in Cuba and abroad. One of the most important and influential organic intellectuals is the *trovador*⁷⁹ Carlos Varela.

Starting in the late 1980s, a new version of the movement started by Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés resurfaced during the latter part of the 1980s and gained particular strength during the 1990s. *La Novísima Trova* movement, conformed by musicians grouped in what became known as *la generación de los topos*⁸⁰ or the generation of the moles, as is at times described by media and music commentators, was heavily influenced by the 1970s hippie movements of the United States and rock and roll musicians like Bob Dylan, Jimmy Hendrix, Janice Joplin and the Rolling Stones, as well as the Beatles (Reloba, 2010, 6).⁸¹ The social consciousness prevalent in

⁷⁹The term *trovador* can be loosely translated to “troubador” or folk singer.

⁸⁰ It was Joaquín Borges-Triana who named this group of musicians ‘the generation of the moles.’ It included most prominently Carlos Varela and Frank Delgado (Borges-Triana, 1988, np). For more information see “Canción Cubana Contemporánea. La Luz, broder, la luz” by Borges-Triana at <http://www.temas.cult.cu/revistas/39-40/060-072joaquin.pdf>

⁸¹ Listening to these artists, or forming combos or cover bands was considered “socially problematic.” However, this is precisely what many of the musicians from the generation of the

the *La Nueva Trova*'s music was also an important influence for the new *trovadores*, a feature that can be appreciated through an analysis of the lyrics of their songs.

Main exponents of this new type of *trova*, such as Carlos Varela and Frank Delgado grew up during the early years of the revolution⁸² and experienced artistic censorship firsthand. Their experiences, combined with the rebellious character that was always central to the ethos of the Cuban revolution, and the social consciousness and solidarity with Latin America found in the songs of *La Nueva Trova*, created a new type of socially conscious music. Thus, despite new elements added to the music performed by *trovadores*, a continuum between the generation of the moles and the earlier cultural movement spearheaded by Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés was established through shared musical aesthetics, a similar interpretation of political events and their repercussion in society, and an identification with the social content and relevance permeating their work.

With the relationship between Cuba and the United States deteriorating during the 1970s, and the government censorship of American music continuing, many Cuban youth listened to rock musicians from the United States and considered them a central part of their musical influence. Carlos Varela, one of the main representatives of *la generación de los topos*, was one of these youngsters influenced by rock music. The inclusion of rock rhythms in Varela's music became an implicit criticism of Cuba's cultural policy in itself, without requiring the inclusion of explanatory lyrics or explicit content to accomplish its goal. This is a central feature of Cuba's socially conscious movements up to this point: criticism is direct, but it can be used subtly. Moreover, a large part of the socially conscious music created in the period ranging from the

moles did, as Carlos Varela explained to me in an informal talk at Queens University in November 2010.

⁸² Carlos Varela was born in 1963 in Havana. For more biographic information see <http://www.carlosvarela.com/client/texts/show.php?keyword=biography>

1970s to the 1990s did not directly criticize the Cuban government, but instead focused on policies adopted by the government. This was done partly as a result of the wide popular acceptance of the revolutionary government, but it can also be interpreted as the musicians' self-preservation strategy, since criticizing the Cuban political structure implied disagreement with the revolutionary process as a whole. Indeed, even criticism of specific policies must be done tactfully, since questioning governmental decisions in Cuba can be interpreted by the Cuban government as a means of challenging the government itself, a process which can prove detrimental to the artist in a country where there have been - until very recently - no alternative markets through which to create and market musical production.⁸³

Varela's choice of rhythms and lyrical content were not well received by the government, concerned about his unconventional and somewhat foreign way of interpreting and reflecting Cuban daily life (Reloba, 2010, 8). More than the rock influence in Varela's music, the lyrics of his songs - particularly those included in the first two albums: *Jalisco Park*⁸⁴ and *Como los Peces*⁸⁵ - are very critical of Cuba's social and political reality, including the consequences of the

⁸³ The only way in which the government has reacted to artists criticizing their political decisions ever since the 1980s is by creating barriers to musicians' access to the means of production and distribution of music. With the opening of transitional markets in the 1990s the effectiveness of the retaliation diminished, and thus a surge in socially conscious music can be seen in the latter years of the 1990s and throughout the 2000s.

⁸⁴ *Jalisco Park*. Centro de la Cultura Popular Canaria/ SGAE, 1989.

The album came out only three years after his first concert, given in Spain with the support of Silvio Rodríguez- and is still one of the most popular albums in the entire discography of Carlos Varela. In it the listener can appreciate the training of Varela in the theatre, since the songs are constructed like plays, reflecting more than analyzing in depth the social and political situation of Cuba during the final years of the 1980s.

All but one of Varela's albums (*Carlos Varela en Vivo*) were produced and largely recorded outside of island. For more information see www.carlosvarela.com.

⁸⁵ *Como los Peces*. Graffiti Music Records/SGAE, 1994

troubled relationship between Cuba and the United States. This is one of the recurrent themes in Varela's music, and the central motif in *Foto de Familia*:⁸⁶

“*Detrás de los que no se fueron
Detrás de los que ya no están
Hay una foto de familia
Donde lloramos al final.*”⁸⁷

Varela's music adopted the lyricism of *La Nueva Trova* while introducing the direct criticism of contemporary Cuba that would be adopted by the following generation of socially conscious musicians. As a result, Carlos Varela faced substantial censorship from government sources, concerned with his outspoken, critical lyrics. In Varela's case, songs that remain banned from the main distribution channels include *Memorias* and *Guillermo Tell*.⁸⁸

The censorship faced by Carlos Varela is of a different sort than that faced by Silvio Rodríguez at the beginning of his career, although they both suffered a lack of access to official means of music production and distribution: while in some government circles Rodríguez was only deemed to be useless to the social process undertaken by the Revolution, new artists like Carlos Varela were seen as dangerous by being overly critical and exposing social truths that

⁸⁶ Included in *Como los Peces*, 1994.

⁸⁷ Behind those who did not leave/behind those who are here no longer/there is a family portrait/where we cry in the end.

⁸⁸ *Memorias* (Memories) and *Guillermo Tell* (William Tell) are both found on *Jalisco Park*, although they have been included in later albums. These two songs can be characterized as anthems of specific generations of Cubans, and even though they remain banned from the radio and television, a large number of Cubans know them by heart. *Memorias* chronicles the economic and social hardships which Cuba endured during the 1980s and 1990s by stating in the song: I did not have Superman, I had Elpidio Valdés, and my television was Russian. On the other hand, *Guillermo Tell* tells the story of William Tell's son wanting to take over his father's crossbow. Many have argued that William Tell is a representation of Fidel Castro, and while Varela has not denied this, he has also argued that while it is applicable in Cuba, it is also applicable elsewhere when a father figure and the following generation are in confrontation.

neither the government nor Cuban society wished to confront so publicly. In fact, Varela acknowledges this fact in several of his songs, most notably in *Jalisco Park*:

*“Y así tengo enemigos, que me quieren descarrilar
Haciéndome la guerra porque me puse a cantar
Pero pongo una historia por encima de su razón
Y sé con qué canciones quiero hacer Revolución
Aunque me quede sin voz, aunque no me vengan a escuchar
Aunque me dejen solo, como a Jalisco Park.”⁸⁹*

Key figures in Cuba -cultural brokers holding positions of power within the governmental structures -are able to perceive changes in society’s needs and wants, and to decrease the level of censorship young musicians face. In the same way that Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés could depend on Haydée Santamaría and the *Casa de las Américas* cultural institution to support their efforts, Carlos Varela came to count upon Silvio Rodríguez during the early stages of his career (Toledano, 2007, np).⁹⁰ The encounter proved to be a fortuitous development for Varela, as his first public performance was in one of Silvio Rodríguez’s concerts in Spain in 1986 (Toledano, 2007, np). The presence of Silvio and his work continues to be a staple in Varela’s music, sometimes citing textually from specific songs of his.⁹¹ One of the most visible examples can be found in *Jalisco Park*:

⁸⁹ And so I have enemies who want to derail me/ making war against me because I started singing./ but I place a story above their reason/ and I know through which songs I want to make a Revolution,/even if I lose my voice, even if they don’t come to listen,/ even if I am left alone, like *Jalisco Park*.

⁹⁰ Since the death of Haydée Santamaría in 1980, the leadership and the cultural importance that *Casa de las Américas* once had has diminished. It was then the turn of established musicians to take up the title of cultural brokers and support the younger generation. In the case of Carlos Varela, Silvio Rodríguez was of major importance in the development of his career.

⁹¹ In one of the informal conversations I had with Varela, he told me that when he first started composing, he would try to copy the style of Silvio as much as possible. Even though he has developed a truly unique style (both in musical aesthetics and in composition) he continues to draw from the creation of Silvio and trovadores of the previous generation, thus creating a continuum in socially conscious music.

*Y aquí surgió aquel loco, que primero nadie entendió
Diciendo cosas raras como en aquella canción:
'La era está pariendo un corazón,
No puede más se muere de dolor.'*⁹²

Censorship was not totally avoided by Carlos Varela, and many of songs are still not played by the Cuban radio and television. Interestingly, however, his albums are sold in Cuba,⁹³ albeit mostly in airports and other tourist-frequented spaces where Cubans have little access. Furthermore, the albums are often priced in dollars, and consequently out of the reach of a large part of the Cuban population. Thus, the music of Varela, Frank Delgado and other artists is mostly acquired by the population through informal networks, a process which to an extent increases the possibility of discussion and debate around the albums and the intended meanings of their lyrics.

All music has an intended audience, and socially conscious music in Cuba during the 1990s is no exception. *La Novísima Trova* was targeted upon Cuban students and intellectuals, as music that could not be danced to, but rather listened to and debated.⁹⁴ Eventually however, in the same way Silvio Rodríguez's songs eventually became mainstream in Cuban society, the music of the new *trovadores* became central to an entire new generation of Cubans due to the relevance of the musical social content for diverse sectors of society. For instance, Carlos Varela

⁹² Excerpt taken from Silvio Rodríguez's *La Era Está Pariendo un Corazón*.

And here emerged that crazy man/ who nobody understood initially/ saying weird things like in that song:/ the era is giving birth to a heart/ it cannot stand it anymore, it is dying of pain.

⁹³ Even though the large majority of them were not recorded on the island. This is also the case for another member of the generation of the moles, Frank Delgado, who has received very little help from the Cuban governmental institutions for the recording and distribution of his albums, a large number of which were recorded live in concerts. For more information see <http://frankdelgado.net/>

⁹⁴ Silvio Rodríguez argued that popularity was never going to be an intended consequence of his songs in his *Debo Partirme en Dos*. Interestingly, the lack of interest in popularity and the honesty of his music was precisely what made him immensely popular among the general Cuban population.

makes use of storytelling and fictional characters⁹⁵ as a way to present his social commentaries in a relevant and appealing manner. This feature of his music makes the listener identify with the character in the song, a process through which he or she may deal with day-to-day problems. For example, in *Como los Peces*⁹⁶ Varela refers to youth who leave the country on small boats and rafts and the mothers' sorrow as they watch them leave:

*“Los muchachos hablan de desilusión
Y en silencio van al mar y se largan...como los peces
Y en la cara de una madre hay una lágrima rodando,
Lagrimas Negras;”*⁹⁷

in *Hombre de Silicona*⁹⁸ he recounts the hardships of a transvestite in Havana:

*Sus amantes le decían la mujer araña
pero en las calles le gritaban maricón;”*⁹⁹

and in *Foto de Familia*¹⁰⁰ he accurately describes the sorrows of a family divided by the political tensions between Cuba and the United States.¹⁰¹ While intertwining political commentary with social description and critique, Carlos Varela reinvented socially conscious music in Cuba.

Reinvention, however, appears to be a central feature in the development of this type of music in the island since it changes according to the social and political circumstances of the country. In

⁹⁵ The theatricality of the lyrics and composition is partially due to the fact that Varela's education was based upon theatre and not music. This influence features in Varela's music and mise-en-scène. For example, he is known for always appearing dressed in black in all his performances.

⁹⁶ Included in *Como los Peces*, 1994.

⁹⁷ The boys talk about disillusion/ and quietly they go to the sea and they leave...like fishes/ and in the face of a mother there is a rolling tear/ black tears.

⁹⁸ Included in *Como los Peces*, 1994.

⁹⁹ His lovers called him the spider woman/ but in the streets they yelled at him “fag.”

¹⁰⁰ Included in *Como los Peces*, 1994.

¹⁰¹ Based on this song the film *Video de Familia* was produced in Cuba by Humberto Padrón in 2001, outlining the tensions between the father of a family who is a member of the Communist Party in Cuba, and a son who departed the island on a boat and continues to send remittances to his family in Havana.

sum, *La Novísima Trova* not only reflects social realities, but also has its own agenda and objectives regarding the future of Cuba.

I. THE 1990s: CUBAN YOUTH COMES OF AGE (AGAIN)

In Cuba, times of crisis allow for the formation of different ways of expression among the population. The early 1990s were times of crisis during which a large number of radical policies were implemented in the island, to a large extent resulting in social, economic and political unrest, and significant societal divisions. As argued above, Cuban youth felt the results of these changes more than anybody else.

During the latter part of the 1990s, while Carlos Varela and Frank Delgado had a secure position in the underground musical realm in Cuba, other projects starting to appear further reflecting the concerns of the new generation. The new underground bands still sought support from some of the governmental institutions, but at the same time there was a growing tendency to look for alternative means of support and funding, usually outside the island (Moore, 2006, 83), even though the lyrics of the songs continued to be centred on Cuban society and politics. Indeed, and despite concern felt by many Cuban bureaucrats, the underground scene of socially conscious music in Cuba was fulfilling the desires of the Cuban revolution by reflecting social and political issues with their music, and thus engaging the population in a meaningful discourse.

The music and to a large extent the content of the music was fully intelligible only to Cubans, and Cubans of a particular generation at that, since it was laden with ever-changing

mannerisms and slang phrases.¹⁰² The reason why metaphor was being increasingly abandoned in these new bands in favour of a more Cuban and arguably “street” way of speaking was to differentiate themselves from the generation of Silvio and Pablo, even though they were recognized as important influences for the new movement. New artists wanted to exert their *cubanidad* or “Cubanness” by all means necessary during a historical period in which the nation was being influenced by foreign investment and tourism coming from all parts of the world.¹⁰³ Further, the emphasis on *cubanidad* is one of the central features in the continuum of socially conscious music in Cuba, and is seen often through the localization of the lyrics and the inclusion of slang and mannerisms. Once again, the affirmation of nationhood in the population is one of the most salient features in the creation of a Cuban identity within the revolution. As a

¹⁰² For example, in *Cuando Sali de La Habana* by Habana Abierta (included in the album *Habana Abierta* recorded with BMG Ariola in 1997) they state:

“Piñol fraseando canciones de ayer
Una bronca luego fiana.
Besitos a mi madre, lloraba papá
sentía que me estrujaba.
De pronto el gorrión que sentí al partir chocaba con una cañada,
Teniendo yo que decir:
Hace calor en La Habana”

“Piñol phrasing yesterday’s songs/ a fight then the cops./ Kisses to my mother, my father was crying/ I felt like he was squeezing me./All of a sudden the sparrow [idiomatic expression for missing Cuba often used among immigrants] that I felt when I left [Cuba] was crashing against a ravine./ Making me say:/ It is really hot in Havana.”

¹⁰³ Tourism was coming mostly from Europe and Canada. The United States has not yet become a substantial source of tourism as a result of U.S. policies forbidding citizens to travel to Cuba. Cuban Americans remain the only ones allowed to travel to the island due to family connections. As stated by the Bureau of Consular Affairs of the United States government: “Transactions related to tourist travel are not licensable.”(Cuba. Country Specific Information, np). Although foreign investment and the appearance of tourism is not a traumatic factor for the population in many parts of the world, the previous discourse of the Cuban revolution has developed a sense of nationalism and a general distrust of foreigners, based on the control of the island by the United States government in the years before 1959. This nationalist consciousness is still an integral part of the Cuban identity, and it has been shaken by the acceptance and encouragement of tourism during the Special Period.

result, the creation of socially conscious music is contributing to moving forward the revolutionary process instead of stalling it, as has been argued in several venues outside of island.¹⁰⁴

In the midst of this situation, a new generation began to override the popularity harnessed among the youth by the generation of the moles. Jorge Perugorría named this emerging cultural movement *la generación de 13 y 8* or the “generation of 13 and 8” (Perugorría, 2003).¹⁰⁵ This was the movement that resulted in the project known today as *Habana Abierta*.

Habana Abierta was never a stable musical group. Instead, it was - and still is- formed by artists who fluctuated in and out of it. Most of the participants served the dual role of composers, singers and musicians. Furthermore, the eclectic mix of styles of the different members, ranging from traditional Cuban music to rock and roll to rap and all the fusion in between, became the central feature of *Habana Abierta*; eclecticism that was no doubt influenced by Cuba’s politic, economic and social opening to the rest of the world, as well as the increasing influence of cultural brokers from other parts of the world in the island’s cultural realm.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Many of the news agencies in Miami specifically, although they have also been appearing in Spain recently, argue that the socially conscious music in Cuba is a way for the population to rebel against the current Cuban government. The underlying assumption is that the musicians are the voice of civil society, a civil society that is only really represented by those opposed to the Cuban government. This is hardly the case, and it is one of the assumptions I seek to debunk in this thesis.

¹⁰⁵ This corner in Vedado is famous in Havana. *La Casa del Joven Creador* is located in the same corner and the *peñas* of independent musicians are renowned for their social content.

¹⁰⁶ The economic recession brought by the Special Period affected the Cuban government’s ability to monetarily support financially the artistic production in Cuba. As a result, the 1990s witnessed an increase in the number of Cuban artists seeking for funds elsewhere, and in the co-productions between Cuba and cultural agencies and production companies from other countries, mostly Spain (Moore, 2006, 234).

This situation allowed for a more daring approach to the arts as a way to reflect and interpret social issues, since many of the artists saw little, if any, support from the Cuban government. Interestingly, and even though several underground artists now had wider access to international markets for their music (as is the case of Carlos Varela), they did not stop creating for the Cuban population almost exclusively.

While the musical preferences of Habana Abierta featured the influence of external factors in Cuban youth and the changes in preferences in Cuban society encouraged by the Special Period, their lyrics were - and continue to be- quite critical of the social and political situation in Cuba. Due to criticism explicit in their music, most of the governmental institutions were reluctant to accept Habana Abierta in the roster of bands or cultural projects approved by the revolution. Habana Abierta became the target of censorship and was denied access to recording studios, venues, and promotion through official means such as television and radio. Nevertheless, censorship made them even more popular in certain pockets of the Cuban population,¹⁰⁷ most importantly among University students and the “freakies.”¹⁰⁸

Only one organization provided support for Habana Abierta and similar bands appearing during this period: *La Asociación Hermanos Saiz*. Colloquially known as AHS, it was formed by the Cuban government with the objective of encouraging young and largely amateur cultural production. While it fulfilled its original objective it has also created a space for alternative bands - both in discourse and type of musical creation- where they can have a relatively stable environment in which to cultivate and garner public support and a following.¹⁰⁹

Habana Abierta produced the single most important song for my generation, one that became an anthem for students and youth that attending regularly the AHS and other alternative venues such as *El Patio de María* in Havana. The song is called *Divino Guión* or Divine Script.

¹⁰⁷ As with youth elsewhere in the world, what is forbidden is generally what is appealing.

¹⁰⁸ The social groups in Cuba work like the social groups elsewhere in the world: they mostly consist of people with shared interests. Most prominent among these interests of Cuban youth are musical preferences, since they often dictate how to dress, behave, and spaces to frequent. The denominations for different groups are slightly different in Cuba than in Canada today. What we call “yuppies” are “mickies,” and loosely, hipsters are named as “freakies,” although this denomination also includes head-bangers and rock lovers in general.

¹⁰⁹ For more information see www.ahs.cu.

*Divino Guión*¹¹⁰ was an anthem of the inconformity of Cuban youth with the evolution (or regression) of the Cuban revolutionary project.¹¹¹ The disillusionment is most present in the following lines of the song:

*“Quedó bonito pero se destiñe
Ya no es lo mismo que cuando éramos fiñes
Pioneros por el Comunismo
Ilusión de cosmonauta.”*¹¹²

In these lines the revolutionary project, along with the ideas of communism that had been promoted by the Cuban government throughout the years, are presented as a utopia that becomes more visible with the passing of time. One of the main features that must be highlighted is the lack of metaphor and the directness of the lyrics. While *trovadores* before the 13 and 8 generation depended on carefully constructed stories to convey a message, Habana Abierta created music and lyrics in a more direct way, although still employing some poetic language. Also worth noting is the use of words that are uniquely understood by Cubans of their generation such as *fiñes*.¹¹³ This device shows the emphasis on nationalism exerted by the artists and the concentration on the Cuban public as the only one in which they are interested. In fact, all the characteristics of the music created by Habana Abierta reinforce the idea that the audience they are writing for, and therefore, are interested in, is exclusively the Cuban public.

¹¹⁰ Habana Abierta. BMG Ariola, 1997.

¹¹¹ Cuban youth's disillusionment is usually as a result of the failure of the Revolution to deliver all it promised, and the concessions that had to be made during the Special Period to keep the country afloat. It would be a mistake to state that youth in Cuba want a United-States type model of governance or economy. For the most part, they want the social services that have always been a staple of the Revolution to remain in place, and decisive input into the political decisions of the country.

¹¹² It turned out pretty but it is losing colour/it is not the same thing than when we were young/pioneers in the defense of communism/ cosmonaut's illusion.

¹¹³ Word signifying “young kids” in Cuban slang.

A large number of Habana Abierta's original members live today outside of Cuba; several, including founders Vanito Caballero and Boris Larramendi,¹¹⁴ reside in Spain. Despite of their place of residence, they have continued to create songs that chronicle Cuban experiences and portray opinions regarding the social and political situation on the island. In one of his emails, Larramendi explained that he continued to use Cuban slang as a way of reinforcing his nationality.¹¹⁵ The music composed by Larramendi follows in detail and analyzes events in Cuba in a more insightful manner than many of the news services in the world.¹¹⁶ For example, in *Asere ¿qué vola?*¹¹⁷ Larramendi showcases the stress and the longing for the island that Cubans experience when they leave, yet another example of the importance of a national sense of belonging shared by Cuban underground social musicians:

*A mi socio Alberto lo metieron cana
por vender una yerbita que no estaba mala
le metieron unos años pero menos que a Raúl
que por decir lo que piensa le metieron 20 tú!
la cosa está en candela en La Habana y en to's la'os
me acuerdo que fumaba y vivía arrebatado pa' aguantar el teque teque
pero desde que me fui el estrés ya no me deja.*¹¹⁸

Censorship is indeed one of the most visible characteristics that allow us to identify underground socially conscious artists in Cuba. However - and while this may sound like a

¹¹⁴ Two of the most recognizable members of the project alongside Kelvis Ochoa. Vanito Caballero is still part of Habana Abierta, while Ochoa and Larramendi are currently pursuing individual projects outside of the island.

¹¹⁵ Re: Preguntas. Email from Boris Larramendi to Ana Ruiz (September 27th, 2010).

¹¹⁶ Including the Cuban, as well as most news stemming from Spain and the United States, particularly Miami.

¹¹⁷ Included in the Habana Abierta album Boomerang. EMI Music, 2005.

¹¹⁸ My friend Alberto was tossed in jail/ because he was selling this little plant that was not bad at all/ he was given a couple of years but he got less than Raul/ who got 20 because he said what he thought/ the thing is on fire in Havana and everywhere/ I remember I used to smoke and I lived high to be able to put up with the demands/ but every since I left [Cuba] the stress does not leave me.

conundrum and somewhat contradictory - many of these artists have become quite visible in mainstream society and have achieved support from government institutions. The most visible example of this phenomenon is the duo Buena Fé.

Buena Fé is altogether different from other bands and musical projects that will be explored in this thesis. From their upbringing in the eastern portion of the island,¹¹⁹ to their professional training,¹²⁰ Buena Fé brings to the table a completely fresh way of interpreting the social and political fabric of the island. While they continue to use pop and rock rhythms in their compositions, they rely heavily on the *trova* traditions in Cuba¹²¹ to relay modern stories and opinions on political and social events.

The duo has been a part of the cultural scene in Cuba since 1999 when their first album - *Corazonero* - came out. However, they did not achieve national recognition until shortly after, when some of their love songs started making inroads on national radio and television. The ballads produced by the duo, although containing social commentary,¹²² are usually more easily digestible by the political leadership and the message is more implicit than explicit - in contrast with the direct lyrics written by the members of Habana Abierta - without being obtuse and unnecessarily metaphorical. The implicit insertion of social commentary has allowed them to record on the island and enjoy the support of the Cuban government regardless of the fact that

¹¹⁹ Although the eastern part of Cuba has a rich historical tradition, it is usually seen as being socially “backward,” and economically less developed.

¹²⁰ Israel Rojas, who fulfills the role of lead singer, completed his training as a lawyer before deciding to commit his time to writing the lyrics for the songs that have made the duo popular all over Cuba and Latin America. For more information see www.buenafermusic.com

¹²¹ This is partly due to the fact that Yoel Martinez, lead guitar player in the duo, played in a traditional *trova* band in Guantanamo before he decided to create Buena Fé with Israel Rojas.

¹²² *Propuesta*, from the album *Catalejo* (EGREM, 2008) is one of the most relevant examples. In it, Buena Fé tells the story of a young Cuban offering his love to a girl in the “national coin” not the dollar, and hoping that “reliance and strength” would be enough for her to accept his love. Even though this was one of the most popular love ballads in the country and the government institutions continuously transmitted the music video on television, the criticism of the dual currency was quite explicit.

many of their other songs have been explicitly critical of the situation in Cuba, both social and political. One of the best examples of the criticism is the song *El Gorrión* or The Sparrow, included in their last album *Extremistas Nobles*, a co-production with the legendary Frank Delgado.¹²³ Indeed the inclusion of Frank Delgado is yet another act of criticism of the censorship, since his work has been subjected to censorship for the past two decades. Indeed, the music in this last album has been visibly influenced by the aesthetics and lyrical prowess of Frank Delgado. The album criticizes several aspects of the current situation in Cuba, ranging from the mass applications to obtain Spanish passports,¹²⁴ the food situation in the island,¹²⁵ and criticism towards members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Cuba (one of the highest decision-making institutions in the island). *El Gorrión*, also included in the album *Extremistas Nobles*, reflects in a very explicit manner the opinion of Buena Fé and Frank Delgado regarding some of the highest political directives of the nation:

*“Él no fue ni monitor en piadera
Ni el más destacado en el volar
Fue tan solo un gorrión cualquiera
Con la buena suerte de volar y llegar
Y anidar y anidar, en el Comité Central
Y no en algún tejado en San Miguel
Y no es por presumir y menos alardear
Sandunguero por encima del nivel.”¹²⁶*

As shown throughout the chapter, the real situation of everyday Cubans is in many ways more accurately reflected by the music of a new generation of socially conscious musicians than

¹²³ *Extremistas Nobles* is one of the very few times when a Frank Delgado album has been promoted on the island.

¹²⁴ *Cubañolito*, included in *Extremistas Nobles*, 2010.

¹²⁵ *Mamífero Nacional*, included in *Extremistas Nobles*, 2010.

¹²⁶ “He was not the leader in chirping/ or the most prominent in flying/ he was only a common sparrow/ with the good luck of flying and arriving/ and nesting and nesting in the Central Committee/ and not on some roof in San Miguel/ and even though I do not want to presume or boast/ “partier” above the level.”

by the political leadership of the country, who have become increasingly foreign to the struggles most Cubans faced during the 1990s and indeed until today.

It would not be accurate to state the Cuban revolutionary government is purposely alienating the population from the political and social processes. Instead, the population's alienation from traditional channels of input into the political realm was a result of a lack of accountability and general transparency among the bureaucracy. Bureaucratic accountability floated upwards towards the higher decision-making apparatus of the Cuban government instead of downwards (towards the population) and the members of the bureaucracy acted consequently. In turn, the population sought leadership in people more acquainted with their daily struggles, men and women who were accountable to them. Thus, socially conscious musicians became to a large extent the political and social leaders of the Cuban population, the organic intellectuals described by Antonio Gramsci.

Carlos Varela, Frank Delgado, Buena Fé and Habana Abierta did much more than chronicle the situation of their compatriots: they reflected and analyzed it, creating in this manner a two-way channel of communication with the population which was largely lacking in influence within the traditional political realm. When these bands or artists talk about a particular topic, they do so influenced by the importance that this topic has on the population. Consequently, once the song is created and shared with the population, mostly through channels put in place by the artists themselves, the topic is returned with a new interpretation. The artist's analysis is then considered by the population and, depending on its accuracy or relevancy to the issue at hand, it becomes popular or not. This dynamic mimics that of political parties campaigning in Western nations with one main difference: while parties (if elected) will hold power for a certain period of time, socially conscious musicians in Cuba have invested in

maintaining their relevancy only because of the commitment they feel towards their discourse. While this notion may sound somewhat idealistic, one must consider the fact that many of these artists do not have substantial revenues from shows held on the island -since many of them must perform underground and without the sponsorship of the government, as was the case with Habana Abierta for a period of time - or from record sales. Thus, their incentive to engage in political discourse is not monetary, but moral.

In short, socially conscious musicians have proven their commitment to further the political discourse through non-traditional means on the island throughout the 1990s. However, it is to be noted that these artists are notably products of the revolution in many ways: the political and social consciousness, the emphasis on nationalism and the high level of education necessary to properly analyze political and social situations, are all direct results of revolutionary policies. In times of crisis, such as the economic downturn prompted by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the revolutionary goals appear alive in the population and their organic intellectuals, who struggle to both further and, to an extent, re-install the achievements of the revolutionary process, and a pride in being Cuban.

CHAPTER 4. HIP HOP AS THE NEW FORM OF SOCIAL DISCOURSE

I. ...Y LO QUE VINO DESPUES. THE SITUATION IN CUBA DURING THE 2000s

During the first decade of the 21st century, the economic situation in Cuba improved in comparison with the initial hardships experienced throughout the Special Period. Nevertheless, the population continued to experience shortages and distress imposed by the double currency system.¹²⁷ Likewise, the illegal activities the population must engage in order to obtain the basic consumer items needed in the household also continued (Gordy, 2006, 384). Many of these activities are linked to the tourist industry, and range from hustling in the streets (whether it involves sexual activities or not),¹²⁸ to room rentals and outright prostitution.¹²⁹ This break with the moral values instilled in the population over earlier decades of the Cuban revolution is indeed one of the most traumatic experiences for youth and significantly contributes to the disillusionment with the ideas of the revolutionary process. Furthermore, it encourages a blatant

¹²⁷ Double currency in Cuba allows the Cuban government to tax tourists' expenditures, who must exchange their currency to the Convertible Peso, or CUC instead of U.S. dollars. Conversely, the government allows the general population to acquire CUCs at a fluctuating rate, which usually averages 25 National Pesos for 1 CUC. Taking into account that the average Cuban worker gets paid an average of 300 National Pesos per month, and that a large number of goods can only be obtained with CUCs, the double currency severely limits Cubans' purchasing power. In this environment, it becomes necessary, then, to hold a job which guarantees access to the more important currency either through state employment (as is the case with joint ventures or in the tourism industry for example) or to have an illegal job that serves the same purpose. (Cluster, 2004)

¹²⁸ This activity is usually known as jineterismo in Cuba. The individuals performing the hustling are usually named jineteros or jineteras. Jineteras are not seen as prostitutes per se by the Cuban population, but instead they are perceived as something resembling American gold-diggers. Jineteras will most likely establish a relationship with the foreigner they initially hustled, and their main objective is often to get married and leave the country in search of a higher socioeconomic status.

¹²⁹ Prostitution as understood in the Western world is very rare in Cuba. However, a new type of woman exchanging sexual favours for foodstuff or material goods has arisen in Cuba in the last few years. They are commonly termed matadoras (killers), and they operate largely among the Cuban population, rarely dealing with foreigners.

disregard for the rhetoric employed by the governmental officials and at the educational institutions.

Human rights commentators have argued that the concept of human rights is contingent on the place in which it is applied, and the broad historical context, as well as on the needs of a specific group (See Denike, 2008; Cirillo, 2010) In this context, human rights cannot be understood as universal values that must be equally respected by all governments and at all times. Instead, human rights can be said to follow a hierarchy.¹³⁰ This notion is particularly important during the 2000s in the Cuban context: Cubans were concerned with the access to social services and subsidized foodstuffs promised by the government, to which they have grown accustomed before the Special Period. Further, they were (and are) concerned with the maintenance of social equality. Instead, the population was bombarded with internationalist rhetoric, and news pieces covering all possible corners of the planet- while ignoring the challenges of everyday life on the island that are particularly damaging to the general population. While the government's objective was to show the Cuban population the comparative advantages they undoubtedly enjoyed, their everyday needs were not being properly addressed. As Aldo from the hip hop duo Los Aldeanos pointed out, *los discursos no alimentan*.¹³¹ Indeed, as former vice-president Carlos Lage Dávila stated in 1993, Cuba's problems were economic and not political, adding that only those unfamiliar with Cuban reality would demand the island to undertake sweeping political changes (Lage Dávila, 1993, np). To a large extent, this remains a fair assertion.

¹³⁰ In short, a specific sector of the population will not be specifically concerned with their "right" to vote, or their "right" to have a certain number of political parties in their nation if their day-to-day needs are not being met. Instead, they will be preoccupied with their access to food, clothing and shelter. In the same manner, once these basic necessities are met, they will move on to be concerned about education and health care.

¹³¹ "Speeches do not provide food."

The Cuban population thus turned to activities which did not align with revolutionary values, while at the same time continuing to engage in revolutionary activities,¹³² creating what is known as *doble moral* in modern Cuba. The term refers to the phenomenon of individuals engaging in illegal activities while at the same time maintaining the rhetoric and the beliefs of the revolutionary government.¹³³ While many commentators argue that Cubans who engage in this sort of social behaviour proclaim their revolutionary beliefs just to avoid problems with the authorities, this is a rather simplistic generalization lacking empirical evidence, and does not reflect the true sentiments of the Cuban population. Regardless of the motivations of these individuals (encompassing a large majority), what cannot be denied is the confusion engendered by this sort of behaviour, or the social environment it spawns in Cuban society. Further, the use of this *doble moral* also hinders the transmission of moral values to youth, since many of the illegal activities must take place in the home, thus making it impossible for parents to conceal their contradictory activities from their children. It has also been argued that the post-Special Period stage¹³⁴ precipitated a loss of values among the Cuban population, propitiated no doubt by the activities in which Cubans engaged in order to better their living arrangements in the face of hard economic conditions. All of these factors had a major impact on the generation growing up during the 1990s and early 2000s, and shaped their understanding of the country and the

¹³² For instance, a typical case would be a person who has full time employment rolling cigars in a government factory and is a member of the Communist Party and an upstanding citizen according to revolutionary standards. However his/her salary is insufficient to cover the needs of his/her family and the improvements his/her home needs, and thus he/she decides he/she will steal cigars per day in order to sell them to foreigners and supplement his/her income. This sort of moral dilemma is an everyday occurrence in Cuba.

¹³³ For further and illustrative examples regarding *doble moral* and contradictions in post-Special Period Cuba refer to Gordy, 2006.

¹³⁴ This period has been assigned all sorts of names by the people living in the island. One of the most memorable ones is included in the recent Cuban movie *Juan de los Muertos: la cosa esta que vino después* (this thing that came after). For more information regarding the movie see: <http://www.juanofthedeadmovie.com/lang/es/>

revolution. While many of these youths migrated, many others preferred to stay behind, arguing that Cuba needed to find solutions to its problems from the inside, and not from the outside.

Indeed, Gordy argues:

“Popular expressions of discontent incorporate such implicit principles of Cuban socialism and unity, equality, and nationalism in their complaints about its shortcomings. Frustration with the failure of socialist principles to manifest themselves in daily life does not necessarily indicate a lack of faith in socialist ideology or lead to the conclusion that it can only survive as dogma imposed by the leadership.”(Gordy, 2006, 13).

Many socially conscious musicians involved in emerging movements remained on the island and actively worked to remedy the political and social situation by engaging in an interactive discourse with the population and more importantly, with other youth. Indeed, the 2000s witnessed a further distancing between youth and the political structure dominated by elderly Cubans,¹³⁵ but a growth in alternative means of political discourse and civilian input. Some of the most publicized ways has been the “blogosphere” of the country,¹³⁶ which is most clearly represented by USAID-funded blogger Yoani Sánchez.¹³⁷ There are also “alternative

¹³⁵ The youngest person currently serving in the Cuban Council of Ministers was born in 1967. However, many of the current ministers are around 60 years of age, with the eldest being 88 years of age. For more information on the members of the Council of Ministers see http://www.cubagob.cu/gobierno/cur_min.htm for a complete list.

¹³⁶ The “blogosphere” is one of the main pet projects of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and thus it has gained significant (illegal) financial and technological support from the U.S. government. Perhaps the most visible linkage between the U.S. government and the bloggers in the island is represented in the case of Alan Gross; who entered Cuba as an independent subcontractor to USAID allegedly with the objective to aid the Jewish community with telecommunications and access to internet. However, the Cuban government discovered that he participated in a secretive “democracy promotion” program. He was arrested on December 2009 and remains in prison on the island. Refer to The Washington Post for updates on the case and interactions between both governments regarding Gross’ release: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/richardson-comes-up-empty-handed-in-effort-to-free-alan-gross/2011/09/11/gIQaurZeKK_story.html

¹³⁷ Yoani Sánchez is a Cuban blogger resident on the island, who has gained international recognition through her blog Generation Y, in which she consistently criticizes the Cuban government. See her work at: <http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony/>

political parties”¹³⁸ on the island and “dissident groups” like the highly publicized *Damas de Blanco*;¹³⁹ many of them also receiving direct funding from the United States government through their Interest Section (de facto embassy) in Havana (MINREX, 2008, np). Indeed all these groups have in common the support provided by the United States government, and thus they can hardly be called representative of the Cuban population when their accountability is to their funder, and not the people of Cuba.¹⁴⁰ Further, if compared with music created by socially

In a very recent development, following the declassification of Wikileaks documents, it was found that an interview supposedly granted by Barack Obama to Yoani Sánchez was a hoax. However, it was properly staged by news agencies in order to launch her to international stardom in the blogging realm. Although the news is largely invisible in American media, Prensa Latina reported the event in an article entitled “Obama nunca respondió entrevista a bloguera cubana.” For further information see: http://www.prensa-latina.cu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=320972&Itemid=1

¹³⁸ According to the Human Rights Commission of the Christian Democratic Party of Cuba (not recognized by the Cuban state), there are 453 dissident, opposition, and human rights organizations on the island (Alvarez quoted. in Gordy, 2011, 400. ft 22.). However, depending on the source and its definition of “human rights” and “political parties,” the number of groups is quite variable.

¹³⁹ The Ladies in White appeared for the first time in Cuba during the 2003 “Black Spring,” when a number of individuals collaborating with the United States government were imprisoned. The group was initially composed of women who were related to the incarcerated individuals, but membership has grown and expanded to other parts of the country. The Ladies in White participate in what can be called “disorganized protests” without a clear objective: their visibility is achieved by dressing in white and parading around the streets and churches in Havana (and most recently in Santiago) chanting Libertad! (Freedom). Like many of the so-called dissident groups in Cuba, they lack a specific political objective, and they have publicly acknowledged their monetary dependence on the United States government. For further information see Laura García Freyre “De la Iglesia a la Plaza: Las Damas de Blanco y la Lucha por el Espacio Público en La Habana.”

http://scholar.googleusercontent.com/scholar?q=cache:ALPwAHXhedEJ:scholar.google.com/+Freyre+de+la+iglesia+a+la+plaza&hl=en&as_sdt=0,5

¹⁴⁰ The problem of the so-called “upwards accountability” is not restricted to these groups in Cuba, nor to projects and institutions funded by USAID. Most of the groups that lack internal funding, such as NGOs face this problem. Upwards accountability refers to the shift in allegiance occurring when an organization created to support a certain group, and must change their methods and reconsider their goals in view of the alternative objectives of an external funding institution. For more information see Sabatini, 2002.

conscious artists (as well as movies and other forms of cultural expression) these groups have garnered very little support among the general population on the island.¹⁴¹

In the midst of the chaotic economic and political situation of the Special Period, youth in Cuba continued shifting their way of thinking, as well as the expectations placed on governmental structures, based largely on the new form of society that was coalescing around them. Further, one of the main forces influencing the changing patterns in youth's behaviour was the further opening of the Cuban economy to foreign investment and tourism. With tourists from developed nations flowing into Havana and the rest of the island, taking advantage of newly constructed tourist facilities, the average Cuban youth wondered how - if the Cuban government was relentless in their assertion that Cuba was for the Cubans - they were unable to access these establishments.¹⁴² They wondered why should they engage in *doble moral* activities in order to be able to attend a concert at *La Casa de la Música de Miramar*, and in this manner they further acknowledged the increasing gap between the governmental discourse and their everyday reality. Different factors contributed to the unease and the disillusionment in the Cuban population: a lack of coverage in the news media of problems they faced every day¹⁴³ and the general

¹⁴¹To a large extent this is because their activities are not targeted on Cubans living on the island. For instance, Cuban bloggers like Yoani Sánchez cannot expect a large number of the Cuban population to read her internet-based blog *Generación Y* when internet is so hard to access on the island, and so expensive.

¹⁴² The prohibitive prices were one of the main reasons why these clubs, hotels and tourist areas were off limits for a large number of Cubans. However, a *de facto* apartheid was also implemented, in order for Cubans not to mingle with the tourist visitors. The government was aware that the exchange of information could influence the development of society, and introduce the vices which the revolution had tried to avoid since taking power. Thus, facilities for tourists were intended (before 2010) exclusively for foreigners and Cubans were not allowed inside the hotels and other facilities even if they had the appropriate currency to pay for the desired services. This changed in 2010 and Cubans now stay at the same hotels as foreign tourists.

¹⁴³ One of the most blatant examples is the lack of media coverage on the shanty towns developing on the outskirts of Havana, with homes constructed haphazardly by internal immigrants from the eastern provinces. The residences lack the most basic conditions and

discontent with the Cuban government sending medically trained personnel to Venezuela¹⁴⁴ are some of the most visible examples when talking to youth in Cuba.

The compound result of these variables encourages an atmosphere of restlessness among youth, and indeed the presentation of these controversies has further engaged this sector of the Cuban population in cultural projects with social and political meaning. While the traditional rhythms of *trova* were still very important during that period, new movements started emerging, and arguably, they have changed the socially conscious music scene on the island in a radical manner.

II. NEW MOVEMENTS APPEARING

For historical - and geographical - reasons, cultural tendencies of both Cuba and the United States have influenced each other since the beginnings of the century. For example, this continues to be the case, and it is particularly prominent in the case of the emerging hip hop movement in the island.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s hip hop and the so-called “gangsta” rap were exploding in the United States musical market, with bands like Public Enemy and the Wu Tang

services, since they are mainly constructed using discarded materials found in the city, and lack access to electricity, water and sewage. Further, because they are deemed “illegal” by the government, many of the children born in these townships lack the necessary paperwork to be enrolled in an educational institution. Their lack of visibility in the discourse allows for them to be ignored by the governmental institutions and their problems are often not addressed. For further information refer to the 2006 documentary *Buscándote Habana*, found at:

<http://vimeo.com/976720>

¹⁴⁴ Indeed, Cuba’s main source of income at the moment is the export of professional services to other nations (developed and developing alike) among which figures prominently the doctors that are sent to Venezuela, constituting an estimated total of 30% of all the goods and services earning (Morris, 2011, 21). In both the diplomatic and the economic field the export of professional services is beneficial to the Cuban population as a whole. However, the government and the media have failed in transmitting the message in a proper manner to the population (full disclosure of the governmental budget is difficult to attain and not offered to the population), thus creating discontent and distrust.

Clan making it into the mainstream and out of the ghetto (Nuzum, 2001, 165). Once hip hop started being played on popular radio stations in the United States, youth in Havana and other parts of the country began listening to this new type of music through illegal radio receivers,¹⁴⁵ and recordings circulating by hand.

Due to its location in the capital and its high youth density, the neighbourhood of Alamar in Havana became the hub for Cuban hip hop during the late 1990s (Fernández, 2003, 582). It continues to be considered the birthplace of hip hop in Cuba although bands have been created throughout Havana and most of the provinces, and have gained more notoriety in the governmental structures and recognition among the youth that the initial bands established in Alamar.

Nevertheless, during the late 1990s hip hop culture gained very little attention among Cuban youth in general. Because this was a type of music with insufficient roots on the island to allow for the new musicians to create their own content and ways of performing it, the majority of new Cuban hip hoppers repeated the discourse of established American rappers. Themes included violence on the streets, firearms, and “pimping.” None of these themes were particularly relevant to the social or political situation in which Cuba was immersed, and thus did not attract a large following. Further, for a limited period of time it looked as if hip hop in Cuba was to be an offshoot of the popular *reguetón*,¹⁴⁶ since the content was generally lacking

¹⁴⁵ Radio receivers in Cuba are usually altered before being sold to the population, or distributed. The main reason for this action is Radio Martí, a radio station put in place by interest groups in Miami with the objective of sending radio messages encouraging the overthrow of the government through violence if necessary. However, disregarding the rigging in the radio receptors, the Cubans have managed to - once again - modify them in order to receive radio stations and programs from elsewhere, mostly (due to geographic closeness) from the United States. This is one of the many ways in which different types of music reach the island.

¹⁴⁶ Reguetón remains hugely popular in Cuba. It is an eclectic mixture of Caribbean rhythms with rap and repetitive lyrics. The result is a type of music that, although it is highly danceable, contributes little to the social and political discussion of Cuban society.

lyrically, and Caribbean rhythms were included to make the music more appealing to the portion of the population interested exclusively in dancing.

The year 2000 was the specific point in which Cuban hip hop started to become distinctively Cuban, with the release of the hip hop group Orishas' first *album A lo Cubano*.¹⁴⁷ Orishas¹⁴⁸ had a winning strategy to become known and respected among the Cuban population: traditional hip hop lyrics combined with parts of the text sung to the beat of traditional Cuban music. Further, the lyrics chronicled in a less-than-subtle manner the realities and social situation in the Cuba they lived in. Some authors argue that Orishas reinstalled the *kitsch* in Cuban music, by glorifying some activities (such as prostitution) that instead should have been criticized (Javorski, 2009, 35). For instance, in the song *Atrevido*, included in *A lo Cubano*, the band tells the story of a woman and her pimp taking advantage of a foreigner visiting the island:

*Todo lo que le pedía
El punto se la gastaba
Oh, una linda habitación en el Cohiba
El punto se la gastaba
Ay un vestido para ella,
Ay un vestido para ella,
Una camisa pa' mí
El punto se la gastaba
Si quería ir a la playa
El punto se la gastaba
Ya la cuenta no le daba, no le daba
El punto se la gastaba
Al concierto con Orishas a vacilar
El punto se la gastaba¹⁴⁹*

¹⁴⁷ *A lo Cubano* was released on 1999, closely followed by *Emigrante* (2002) and *El Kilo* (2005). For further information refer to: <http://www.orishasthebest.com/Index2.html>

¹⁴⁸ Orishas took their name from the name given to deities in the Afro-Cuban pantheon. The word “gods” is substituted by “orishas.”

¹⁴⁹ All she asked for/ the stupid man spent his money. / Oh a pretty room in the Cohiba [hotel]/ the stupid man spent his money/ Ay a dress for her/ a dress for her/ a shirt for me/ the stupid man spent his money./ If she wanted to go to the beach/the stupid man spent his money/ the check

In the song the foreigner is both portrayed as being disrespectful of Cuba (displaying a conqueror's mentality) and dim-witted, as he can be exploited by the locals, who do not feel bad taking advantage of him. In this sense, the song is a true account of many Cubans' feelings. Furthermore, the same types of ideas regarding the treatment of foreigners by Cubans have been replicated in other songs.¹⁵⁰

Thus, by including the viewpoints of the population and stories reflecting everyday events in Cuba, Orishas guaranteed such a high level of popularity among the Cuban population - regardless of age - that their popular support has not waned even though the band has been residing in Europe for an extended period of time. The trio has never experienced active censorship at the hands of the Cuban government, partly as a result of their social comments being rather descriptive instead of blatantly critical, and also because they refrain from openly political commentary. However, Orishas showed the way for the following generation of hip hoppers; the groups which followed noticed that, to obtain recognition among the Cuban population, achieving a meaningful discourse and engagement with youth was central. And this is exactly what has happened.

Socially conscious American musicians were also central to the development of a similar movement in Cuba. The most important figure in this development can be said to be Nehanda Abiodun.¹⁵¹ Some commentators (most importantly Sujatha Fernández) have argued that the hip

was not adding up/the stupid man spent his money/ to the concert with Orishas to enjoy/ the stupid man spent his money.

¹⁵⁰ One of the best examples is the song Mangos Bajitos by Los Aldeanos, which will be analyzed later in this chapter.

¹⁵¹ Abiodun is a veteran of the New Afrikan movement in the United States and migrated to Cuba after being persecuted for her activities. For further information regarding Abiodun and the Black August movement refer to her article "Life Underground" found at: <http://afrocubaweb.com/rap/nehanda.htm>

hop movement in Cuba is intrinsically linked to the issue of race. Abiodun created a Black August chapter in Havana, and has promoted hip hop at the grassroots level as a way of reclaiming the rights of the black race in the island. However - and this is a point that should be noted - many of the groups employing solely a discourse based on race are much less likely to be accepted by the general youth in Cuba, since the struggles they rhyme about are removed from their daily struggles.¹⁵² Nevertheless, Abiodun created a space in which young rappers could hone their craft before the movement was accepted by Minister of Culture Abel Prieto.¹⁵³ Black August also organized events and concerts with socially conscious rappers from the United States such as Mos Def, Common, and Talib Kweli, thus promoting exchange and learning opportunities for the young hip hoppers in the island.

From that point in the early 2000s, a true Cuban hip hop underground movement arose, extremely (uniquely) concerned with social and political commentary within the island. Indeed, they have increasingly become the main representatives of all segments of Cuban youth: true organic intellectuals. However, due to the persistent censorship employed by the state, and the economic difficulties faced by the general Cuban population, these young rappers have resorted to creating their own music by recording it themselves and distributing it through alternative

¹⁵²This is not to say there is no racism in Cuba: there is. However, the governmental policies have eroded the institutional representations of racism and thus the practice is not entrenched in society. Furthermore, the national identity enforced by the Cuban government identifies the individual Cuban with the nation, not with a specific racial identity or social group. In fact, those who visit the island can attest that Cubans do not generally identify themselves as “black” or “white,” much less as “African-Cuban,” but as “Cuban.” In short, race discourse is not a main social problem in Cuba, and this can be reflected in the lack of popularity among the youth that groups purporting this discourse face. Examples include Explosión Suprema and Obsesión.

¹⁵³ The movement was formally accepted in 2001, which led to the creation of La Agencia Cubana de Rap (Cuban Rap Agency) on September 2002. Although the recognition of Cuban hip hoppers has its merits, it can be argued that some of the most relevant representatives of the group are routinely excluded from the formal institutions. See:http://www.ecured.cu/index.php/Agencia_Cubana_de_Rap:

means among the population. This mode of musical production grants them autonomy from the state, a situation that would have been unthinkable years earlier. This separation, although a financial hurdle, also grants them more freedom in the realm of musical creation.

Musical creation is thus the first struggle in the long list of challenges these artists must overcome in order to place their vision on the streets of the island. Like every other musician starting out, underground artists in Cuba are forced to hold daytime jobs to provide stable income for their families. However, and unlike popular musicians in Cuba and elsewhere, even after they have achieved recognition among the Cuban population they are still forced to work in alternative fields, since their music creates tremendously little income. This is partly due to the censorship imposed by the Cuban state, since artists in Cuba during the revolutionary period needed governmental permission to engage in their craft and access foreign markets. This activity became even more prominent during the Special Period, when the Cuban government needed the revenues obtained by the artists in the international market (Remba, 2008, 503). To an extent, this situation is a testament to the rappers' social commitment, since they work solely in order to create music for the population and advance the social and political situation of the island through an alternative discourse.¹⁵⁴ Some of them, Los Aldeanos for example, have released over fifteen albums in less than 10 years under governmental censorship.¹⁵⁵

After music has been written it must be recorded. To do so, rappers need a musical background to which they apply their lyrics. In western nations backgrounds are usually

¹⁵⁴ The assumption is based on an elimination process, since monetary stability is visibly not the incentive.

¹⁵⁵ As a result of the difficulties in accessing internet in the island, it is difficult for underground musicians without any governmental support to maintain a web page with sufficient and stable information. As a result, Los Aldeanos change websites quite often, and the information is always partial. For an updated list of their albums see:

http://microabierto.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=272:los-aldeanos-discografia&catid=34:internacional&Itemid=60

purchased by rappers if groups cannot count upon a talented enough DJ to create them.

Furthermore, this is not only a matter of talent. Expensive equipment is necessary when creating a musical background, equipment that to a large extent is not available in Cuba, thus making it even more difficult for rappers to record without the support of the Cuban state. Showing traditionally Cuban practical skills to overcome this challenge, many underground rappers in Cuba have created their own musical background accompaniments. The other portion of the recording process involves a mixer and a proper recording studio. Very few artists living on the island have proper recording studios of their own: some of the most glaring exceptions are Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés, who have funded recording studios in their private homes, and contributed monetarily to government recording studios.¹⁵⁶ Another exception is the independent punk rock group Porno Para Ricardo, who own a recording studio in the lead singer's (Gorki Avila) apartment in Havana.¹⁵⁷ The rest of the recording studios in general are truly makeshift, including closets and other enclosed spaces in which artists record their music. This is the case of *Real 70 Records*,¹⁵⁸ perhaps the most popular recording studio in the hip hop underground in Cuba.

Once the album has been recorded, it must be distributed. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union the black market in Cuba has grown enormously, and Cubans have become accustomed to alternative means of distribution for all goods in the market. Music has been transferred by hand-

¹⁵⁶ The best example is Estudios Abdala, funded by Silvio Rodríguez and the Cuban state, and featuring state of the art recording technology.

¹⁵⁷ The studio is well equipped as I could witness on one of my visits. The rest of the apartment, however, is in shambles, as if Gorki had spent every single penny in the building and upkeep of the studio and had little left to buy furniture.

In Havana, Porno para Ricardo albums are distributed freely, mostly in venues such as El Parque de G and Maxim Rock, as well as private house parties.

¹⁵⁸ Real 70 took its name from the physical address in which Papa Humbertico, hip hop producer and rapper, has both his home and studio. Papa Humbertico is the best known producer in the Cuban underground scene, and as a result a large number of the albums recorded by members of this movement have been recorded there at no cost.

to-hand means ever since the days when the Beatles were banned on the island in the 1960s. However, when bands have not been established or are not popular -or when they are largely unable to promote themselves through publicized concerts and the like -it is harder to establish a following or popular support. By the time many of the hip hop groups appeared, venues like *El Patio de María* in Havana and other AHS locations have been either monopolized by *trovadores* or closed by the state, leaving the newcomers to find alternative venues, such as *El Barbaram* in Nuevo Vedado (recently turned into *Pepito's Bar*), *El Cine Yara* also in Nuevo Vedado, and most recently *Maxim Rock*, where rock bands like Zeus and Porno para Ricardo regularly take the stage.

Even though these new venues exist, there is always the risk the government will cancel the concert at the last minute, something that has taken place on several occasions. In order to avoid this situation bands engage in what can be called *guerrilla performances*, in which they appear in alternative functions without informing the public of their presence.¹⁵⁹ Nevertheless, it is worth noting that much of the censorship taking place in Cuban cultural venues can be categorized as self-censorship. This is admitted by the hip hoppers, who have stated in several interviews¹⁶⁰ that directors and managers of the venues insist that they would lose their jobs if any of these groups were to perform, and so the band is effectively excluded from access to the institution without any specific directive from the government or the Ministry of Culture. Furthermore, changes within the Ministry of Culture have been very important in the

¹⁵⁹ I encountered one of these functions on February 2011, when I attended one of the parties for La Muestra de Cine Joven in Havana. Although members of the audience knew there would be performances to liven the party there was speculation regarding who would participate, and very few were aware Los Aldeanos would perform, since only days before one their concerts at Maxim Rock had been cancelled.

¹⁶⁰ See Mayckell Pedrero Mariol's documentary "Revolution" (2008). A copy of the documentary can be found in the following link:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_DVST6RfFc

development of the cultural policy in Cuba and consequently, in the way in which the government deals with bands which perform controversial material. Arguably, none of the cultural ministers in Cuba before have been as in touch with the needs of the Cuban cultural sphere, and specially youth, as well as the current minister, Abel Prieto. Prieto is a Beatles-lover, mullet-sporting writer and cultural theorist who has been at the forefront of integrating alternative means of cultural expression into the mainstream realm and further, bring their ideas to the attention of policy-makers. Thus, the relentless censorship imposed upon previous movements has significantly loosened in the 2000s, and at some levels socially conscious movements have been encouraged.

III. LOS ALDEANOS AND THE HIP HOP MOVEMENTS

During the 2000s in Cuba the most visible socially conscious music that has been making strides in the Cuban youth is the hip hop movement. While in previous years the different ways of mixing *trova* with international styles had captured the attention of the younger population, hip hop and rap became the means through which the new generation expressed their concerns regarding the social and political situation of the island, and their own problems in the new millennium.

The introduction of the culture of hip hop (including break-dancing, graffiti and other modalities) in the island was the result of several factors, including the United States embargo against the island, the control imposed by the Cuban government on the media, and the opening of the island to tourism and foreign investment during the previous decade. The United States embargo gave the Cuban government a consistent rhetoric of “blame” that has been used extensively (some would argue too extensively), especially during the last twenty years

following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Cuban government blamed the lack of consumer goods on the island and the deterioration of the social services provided on the U.S. embargo, which is partially a fair assessment. However, the continued and relentless use of this idea to excuse every problem and shortage gave birth to a growing skepticism among the population, who in true Cuban fashion, devised jokes in which everything would be blamed on the embargo or *bloqueo*, including natural disasters such as hurricanes or droughts. Another unintended consequence of the continued use of this excuse was the fascination with the United States, and the “forbidden fruit aspect”- its dangerous qualities allowed for it to grow all the more interesting in the eyes of the population, and rebellious youth furthered communication with family in the United States and other parts of the world - getting pieces of information regarding the ways of life outside of the island, and presents of consumer goods that could not be obtained in the island. During the years in which the hip hop movement was gaining strength in the United States and elsewhere in the world, the music filtered into Cuba by way of hand, and the Cuban youth became fascinated with the rhythms and the new way of expression of the U.S. black community.

At the same time, the control imposed by the Cuban government on the media makes it both difficult and attractive to attain music that cannot be found easily on the island. Having new music in Cuba is indeed a social accomplishment, and young people pass each other albums downloaded from the internet, brought by relatives from outside of the country or underground tapes of Cuban artists with the same interest that hipsters in Canada pass each other the names and websites of obscure bands in order to attain the social status of being an innovator among their peers. During the early 2000s, hip hop was the newcomer to the musical Cuban realm.

Lastly, the opening of the island to influences from abroad affected the social dynamics not only from an economic standpoint, as discussed previously, but also exposed the general population to cultural insights from other parts of the world they had not been privy to before. Tourists flooding the island brought in new musical tendencies and world views; thus Cuban youth were able to interact with a completely different demographic and became influenced by their tastes in music and food, ways of dressing and thinking. In this manner, much of the hip hop produced in the early stages of the movement was extremely influenced by the social and political conditions in the United States, instead of those in Cuba (Fernández, 2003, 595).

With time, young people following the movement started noticing the differences between their own reality and what was portrayed in their songs, and addressing these differences accordingly in order to create a more interested audience, more engaged with their own problems. It was during 2001 and 2002 that the underground hip hop movement started to gain strength among youth in Cuba, and several bands began to develop certain notoriety among the cultural institutions in the government. It is worth noting that there are two very different spheres of hip hop in the island: while some bands are much more vocal in their criticism or general ideas regarding what the Cuban society and politics should be or do, and delve into issues that are at the very least controversial - as is the case of Los Aldeanos, Silvito el Libre and others - many other hip hop bands such as Free Hole Negro and Obsesión touch on subjects that at times have no outstanding social importance or are not as controversial.¹⁶¹ In the case of the latter, the government has lent them its support through the creation of festivals, institutions and

¹⁶¹ Many of their songs concentrate on race issues, as is the case of Anónimo Consejo, or female-related issues, like is the case of Las Positivas. While neither of these themes are superfluous to the necessary debate on the island, they command much less attention than the controversial political issues which underground rappers discuss. For more information on more recognized hip hop groups in Cuba see: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sujatha-fernandes/911-and-cuban-hip-hop_b_956450.html and <http://www.havanatimes.org/?p=49541>

publications¹⁶² to promote among the youth this new form of cultural expression. However, a large number of these bands have no substantial following among Cuban youth, since the subjects they debate are not as relevant to their own reality, although the music and the events are more visible and accessible to the general population.¹⁶³

The rest of the hip hop movement, that which concerns us, is the section whose members have given themselves the name of *contestatario*.¹⁶⁴ While there is no proper translation in the English language to the term, the idea is that they see themselves like a new breed of revolutionaries, following in the footsteps of Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos,¹⁶⁵ and not only as musicians. The most important band in the modern hip hop scene and arguably, in the socially conscious realm of Cuban music is the duo Los Aldeanos.

The name of the duo, Bian Oscar Rodríguez Galá¹⁶⁶ and Aldo Rodríguez Baquero,¹⁶⁷ means literally “villagers.” According to several interviews with them, the name of the group was chosen because they were preoccupied with the events happening in their small

¹⁶² La Agencia Cubana de Rap published sporadically the magazine *Movimiento*, and the recognized portion of the hip hop movement meets for the yearly Festival Internacional de Rap “Habana Hip Hop” (Havana International Rap Festival) in Alamar.

¹⁶³ This is another important insight into the musical and cultural tastes in Cuba and how they have been influenced by the revolution. Culture is seen as a means of providing communication and debate for the population, expressions with which the population must be intimately in touch. While aesthetics are important in the appreciation of cultural creation in Cuba, the most important part is the message implicit (or explicit) in the work of art, whether it be a piece of musical composition, a painting or a film.

¹⁶⁴ “Contestation” is a loose translation of the self-assigned name of this group of Cuban rappers. However, it fails to fully describe in English its meaning to the Cuban population. While contestation means opposition, the music performed by these artists is not necessarily “contesting” the Cuban revolution, but rather attempting to further it.

¹⁶⁵ Camilo Cienfuegos was one of the Commanders of the revolution. He died in a plane crash in October 1959. See “Camilo, Cronología de un Héroe” by Gabriel Pérez Tarrau. *Gente Nueva* (1976).

¹⁶⁶ Bian (nom de guerre El B) is a psychology student at the University of Havana and a grade school replacement teacher.

¹⁶⁷ Also known as AL2, he is a “hustler.” He is one of many disaffected Cuban youth growing up in the 1990s, who noticed that further schooling would not create a better future in monetary terms for themselves and their families.

neighbourhood, their small city and their small island, and not with the events occurring outside.¹⁶⁸ Los Aldeanos have developed into a source of information for Cuban youth, who have become largely cynical of the points of view and the news covered through the government media.¹⁶⁹ The duo creates an active communication with the Cuban population by addressing day-to-day issues in their music, and providing an interpretation or answer to them on a regular basis. The language used to establish this dialogue with youth is the same used daily on the streets in Cuba, regularly following the evolution of meanings and linguistic characteristics of youth's discourse. Indeed, it can be argued that their impressive musical production is a result of the continuous research work performed in the streets, which are never short of social and political commentary. All of these elements contribute to their huge success in the Cuban underground, and the large number of followers the duo has developed.

Language is one of the most distinctive features of the entire movement of hip hop, but it is very important when looking at the work of Los Aldeanos. The trend in the socially conscious music discussed earlier had pointed towards abandoning the more metaphorical content used by Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés, and instead adopting a more direct language, one that could be identified as being inescapably Cuban by any listener. While musicians during the 1990s

¹⁶⁸ Indeed, the concern regarding the events in the neighbourhood or Havana in general, as well as policy developments and the challenges facing the Cuban population are the main concern for Los Aldeanos in their music. This is particularly significant when they are willing to explore the most problematic news which are usually avoided both by the government rhetoric and by the media, although in recent years several local journalists have delved into more problematic issues without facing censorship.

However, much of the media attention on the island is dedicated to outlining the advantages of Cuba's education or health care, and to criticize the United States and its allies, without addressing the day-to-day problems most Cubans face.

¹⁶⁹ Several authors have emphasized the importance of the arts to civil society and youth in Cuba. For example, Gordy argues that "popular reactions - particularly those represented through art - provide evidence of a continued desire to navigate the principles of Cuban socialism, taking into account both the nation's revolutionary tradition and the challenges of a post-Soviet world." (2006, 386)

undoubtedly advanced the trend, the hip hop movement uses almost exclusively the kind of discursive characteristics found every day on the streets of the island, undiluted. Indeed, many critics have argued the language used by Los Aldeanos and other members of the current hip hop movement in the island is a “punk” language, derived from the censorship they face. One of the most respected cultural critics in Cuba, Roberto Zurbano, argues in the documentary “Revolution” that disrespectful and blatant language is used as a result of lack of exposure in the mainstream channels of distribution in the island. As a result, he states, since artists know they will not attain any air time, they feel it is acceptable to their current audience for them to use a language including curse words, offensive language towards the government and other institutions. While this is a valid point, it can also be argued that it is not applicable in its entirety to the Cuban situation in the 21st century. While Zurbano was comparing the socially conscious movement in Cuba to the punk movement in Britain during the post-war era, he failed to notice that the way in which Los Aldeanos and many other artists talk and interpret the situation surrounding them is indeed the same way in which youth talk on the street.¹⁷⁰ In fact, by recapturing the everyday language used by Cubans they have made art not only democratic in content, but also in form, which is indeed one of the main compliments that can be paid to art. Further, by doing so artists identify themselves as members of the population they strive to represent, inform and interact with. The “realness” of the artist, the veracity of the cultural expression as a reflection of everyday life, thus becomes one of the most important ways in which they are identified with the population. Long gone are the days in which Andy Warhol

¹⁷⁰ It can be argued that language is a variable, and not fixed, entity. Thus, all meanings of words are assigned meaning. Based on this premise, it can be stated that no word is indeed offensive, since it is only assigned offensive meaning by different sectors of society. Consequently, another feature of the current hip hop movement in Cuba is exposing large tracts of the population to language used on the streets, and assign it different meanings as outlined by the new generation. In a way, they are changing the language.

stated that all people wanted was Superstars, the trend in the world for the last few years has been the “realness” of the artists as a person.

The underground Cuban hip hop scene has also been incredibly fruitful. Los Aldeanos have produced an inordinate number of albums since their first appearance on the hip hop scene on 2001. In a short ten-year trajectory, the amount of musical production of the duo is unusually high.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, this trajectory is the product of the duo’s individual efforts, since many of the bands that associated with the *La Agencia Cubana de Rap* have been unable to record albums through this institution.¹⁷²

While the social and political commentary is a constant feature in the work of Los Aldeanos and the rest of the underground hip hop movement, it is best exemplified by the popular song *Mangos Bajitos*,¹⁷³ included in Los Aldeanos’ 2009 album *El Atropello*. The song opens with parts of the dialogue from the popular film *Habana Blues*:

“*Pa’ que vengan unos singao’s que no les importa ni pinga lo que pasa en este país (...) gallegos invasores (...) Pour la France! Y por Valerie*¹⁷⁴, *la portadora de nuestras esperanzas....*”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ For instance, one of the most recognized American rappers, Jay Z, has recorded 11 studio albums since his first appearance in 1996. See <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0419650/>

¹⁷² This is partly because the governmental institutions are not able to fund all the cultural production on the island. As well, available funds are usually allocated towards more traditional Cuban music, with more international visibility. For more information regarding the current economic situation of the Cuban government see Morris (2011).

¹⁷³ “Low-Hanging Mangoes” is the literal translation of the song title. However, it is also an idiomatic phrase referring to things which are very easy to achieve. In this particular song, Los Aldeanos compare Cuba to low-hanging mangoes for the tourists coming into the island.

¹⁷⁴ In the 2005 movie *Habana Blues*, directed by Benito Zambrano, Valerie was a French woman who had sexual relations with one of the two hustler/musician main characters. Valerie represented the opportunity to leave Cuba and arrive in France, where they would have a better chance to perform their music. It is thus that they exclaim, as her plane departs Havana “Pour la France! And to Valerie, the carrier of our hopes.” For further information see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0441297/>

¹⁷⁵ “So some motherfuckers who don’t give a shit about this country can come here (...) Invading Gallegos [from Galicia, Spain] (...) To France! And to Valerie, the carrier of our hopes....

By including these lines Los Aldeanos reinforce existing linkages between the different means of cultural expression on the island. Further, they provide a frame to the listener in which he or she can comprehend the rest of the song. In these lines they portray one of the most difficult things to understand about the island: while it is heavily dependent on tourism to improve the economic conditions of the island, and many Cubans also depend on this industry to further their economic ambitions, it is also a source of distress among the population. In fact, Cubans' perception of foreigners is that they are not interested in the country per se, but only in the promise of cheap rum, beaches and women which the country offers. The nationalism that is central to the new generation of Cubans is also prevalent in the opening lines and in the rest of the song. Los Aldeanos continue:

*“Tú sabes los que vienen a regarle al dinerito
que ésta es la tierra de los mangos bajitos
Tu no vienes a Cuba porque es un país bonito
que ésta es la tierra de los mangos bajitos
tú has cogido algún camello a eso de las 5 y pico nah...
que ésta es la tierra de los mangos bajitos
Europa entera abusando a mi pueblito
que ésta es la tierra de los mangos bajitos
Agua de coco, Añejo, mojito
que ésta es la tierra de los mangos bajitos
todo es barato y un clima súper rico
que ésta es la tierra de los mangos bajitos
ropita sabrosa, mujeres de to's tipo
que ésta es la tierra de los mangos bajitos
lugar perfecto pa' llegar en avioncito!
que ésta es la tierra de los mangos bajitos
No me da mi gana Cubana! (...)
Señor ¿se siente satisfecho?
Claro si en Cuba está hecho,
Tiene mujer, carro, techo y su idioma anula mis derechos,
échese a un lado y sin que me importe
le daré un piano que le dolerá hasta la foto del pasaporte.
¿Crees que me corte? Vas de vacaciones a otra parte,
mi consorte, recoge y parte.*

*Bueno si insistes, después no quiero quejas,
bienvenido y ojalá te estafen en la Habana Vieja.”*¹⁷⁶

In the lyrics the aggressive feelings against the foreigners coming into Cuba are evident in the comparison between the every-day life of a foreigner on the island, the kitsch vision of Cuba they relentlessly pursue during their holidays, and the daily economic struggle of Cubans. Nationalism is also evident: the revolutionary government had promised an island free of “invasion” from richer nations, and having entitled foreigners walking through the streets of Havana, going into places the general population cannot afford, is something that bothers (to say the least) Cuban youth.

Other songs talk about the perception Cuban youth has of the current government. In *Lo Que Es De Todos No Es De Nadie*,¹⁷⁷ Los Aldeanos discuss the increasing and extremely slow Cuban bureaucratic structure, youth’s lack of inclusion in the decision-making of the island, and the general impression of the government structure:

*“Que ustedes son buenos no,
Que son sinceros en todo no,
Que son limpios no, no fallan no,
Muchacho no sigas que no!
Que nunca roban no,*

¹⁷⁶ You know those who come with money/this is the land of the low-hanging mangoes/ you do not come to Cuba because it is a pretty country/this is the land of the low-hanging mangoes/have you ever taken a camel [cheap form of transportation] at like 5am? nah.../this is the land of the low-hanging mangoes/all of Europe is abusing my little town/this is the land of the low-hanging mangoes/coconut water, añejo [aged rum], mojito/this is the land of the low-hanging mangoes/all is cheap and the weather is super nice/this is the land of the low-hanging mangoes/really comfortable clothes, all sorts of women/this is the land of low-hanging mangoes/perfect place to arrive in a plane/this is the land of the low-hanging mangoes./I do not feel like it! (...)/Mr. do you feel great?/Of course if Cuba is perfect for you/you have a woman, a car, a roof/and your language annuls my rights./Move aside and without me caring/I will slap you so hard you will hurt in the passport photo./Do you want me to stop? Go on holidays somewhere else/man, pick up your stuff and leave./Ok, if you insist I do not want any complaints later/welcome and I hope they hustle you in Old Havana.

¹⁷⁷ The song was never formally included in any album.

*Que no hay violencia no,
 que hay democracia no,
 que libertad...dame la N y la O!
 Están metiendo el pie, el cuerpo,
 cabeza, extremidades, familiares, pedazos de estiércol. (...)
 Y no metas más el pie, ni quites cosas sin permiso
 porque tú estas ahí porque así el pueblo lo quiso.
 Y no me vengas a mí con que si patria y sacrificio.
 Que tú has matado gente cantidad
 Y en honor a la verdad nunca te han llevado a juicio.”¹⁷⁸*

More to the point, they state when nearing the end of the song:

“*Así son nuestros delegados, oportunistas y...*”¹⁷⁹

In the same manner, songs including *Nos Achicharraron*,¹⁸⁰ *La Ganga*,¹⁸¹ *La Naranja se Picó*,¹⁸² *Niñito Cubano*¹⁸³ and many others, follow the trend of criticizing in strong terms the current Cuban government and the social situation in the island, specifically in Havana.

However, even though many of their songs follow the trend of blunt language and a generally offensive discourse against government structures, they have also produced songs such as

*América*¹⁸⁴ in which they comment on the state of affairs in the rest of the world. *América* opens

¹⁷⁸ That you are good no/that there is no violence no/that you are clean no, that you do not fail no/Boy do not keep going, it's no!/That you do not steal no,/that there is no violence no/that there is democracy no/and freedom...give me an N and an O!/You're introducing the feet, the body [idiomatic phrase meaning “stealing”]/head, extremities, family members, pieces of manure (...)/And do not introduce your foot anymore/or take things without permission/because you are there because the people wanted it/And don't come and tell me about “motherland” and “sacrifice”/that you have killed a lot of people/and telling the truth they have never taken you to court.

¹⁷⁹ Another idiomatic phrase usually used in Cuba. When the blank is left like so, it usually means that it will be filled with *singaos*, an offensive adjective that can be loosely translated as “motherfucker.”

¹⁸⁰ Included in the album *Nos Achicharraron* (2010)

¹⁸¹ Included in the album *Mi Filosofía* (2006)

¹⁸² Included in the album *El Atropello* (2009)

¹⁸³ Included in the album *El Atropello* (2009)

¹⁸⁴ Included in the album *Viva Cuba Libre* (2010)

with a phrase by Pablo Neruda: *puedo escribir los versos mas tristes esta noche*,¹⁸⁵ and goes on to describe the social and political situation of the American continent:

*“La América de minas y de trabajo infantil forzado
mil desempleados y empleados mal pagados
que ha mostrado más de un tercio de población pobre
y el hambre fue repartida a tres raciones por hombre.
La América de nombres como Hidalgo, Bolívar, El Che,
Malcolm X, Somoza, Bush y Pinochet.
De dictaduras y pueblos sufridos,
donde hay una plaza donde madres lloran hijos desaparecidos.
La de los caídos cruzando muros y alambradas,
la de gringos voluntarios y espaldas mojadas.
La de los que vagan llamados emigrantes mugrosos
porque dice América que todos serán exitosos.
Y es que América tiene sus dueños y su propio sueño:
hazte rico o muere intentando serlo.
Así es América con Hollywood y su Filosofía:
el bien vence al mal cuando un Americano salva el día.”*¹⁸⁶

In this manner Los Aldeanos show their knowledge of the realm outside of the island; in the same way Cuban society is not perfect, neither is the United States or many of the countries in Latin America Cuban emigrate to on a regular basis.

Regardless of their importance, Los Aldeanos do not function in a separate realm from the rest of the socially conscious hip hop movement in the island. Instead, the artists have

¹⁸⁵ I can write the saddest verses this evening.

¹⁸⁶ The America of mines and forced child labour/one thousand unemployed and poorly played employees/that has proven more than one-third of poor population/and the hunger was distributed at the rate of three rations per man./The America of men like Hidalgo, Bolívar, El Che,/Malcolm X, Somoza, Bush and Pinochet./Of dictatorships and suffering peoples/where there is a plaza where mothers cry disappeared children./Of the fallen ones crossing walls and wires,/of voluntary gringos and wetbacks./Of those who are called filthy immigrants/because America says they will all be successful./And it is because America has its owners and its own dream:/become rich or die attempting it./That is America with Hollywood and its philosophy:/the good triumphs over evil when an American saves the day.

gathered in a collective named La Comisión Depuradora,¹⁸⁷ and they regularly contribute to each other's records and projects. The diffusion of ideas within this network spills out to the Cuban population and to a large extent provides the youth with a framework through which analyze the contemporary happenings in the country. As argued by Desiderio Navarro:

“In their respective moments of participation in the public sphere, a majority of Cuban critical intellectuals have believed, more so than many of the politicians, in socialism’s capacity to bear open criticism. They have believed that criticism, far from being a threat to socialism, is its “oxygen,” its “motor:” a necessity for the survival and well-being of the revolutionary process” (Navarro, 2006, 122).

IV. ALTERNATIVE SPACES AND SOCIETAL RAMIFICATIONS

Los Aldeanos thus depend on an extensive group of people in order to be able to create their songs and perform them live. Networks have thus been created within the hip hop movement, which help to circumvent the censorship government-owned spaces place on these artists. Censorship, as discussed earlier in this chapter, limited Los Aldeanos and many other independent artists in Cuba in their endeavours to create and promote their music within the population. However, one of the unintended consequences of censorship was the creation of alternative means of presentation for their art, not only in the form of new venues and guerrilla performances, but also in festivals and new open spaces in which the government could not interfere. The best examples are *El Parque de G*¹⁸⁸ and *Rotilla Festival*.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ La Comisión Depuradora also includes Papa Humbertico, Charly Mucha Rima and Silvito el Libre.

¹⁸⁸ Name given to a popular park located on G street in Havana. During the last five years it has become a hub for youth to meet, and a place where alternative discourses and music flourish.

¹⁸⁹ Rotilla is the name of the Cuban beach in which this popular festival has taken place since its creation in 1998. The festival called for the musicians and artists who did not have a place within the governmental institutions on the island to attend and perform or exhibit their creations. It was independently funded, only requiring government permission to use the beach, and it indeed open the door for many other independent festivals in the island such as the hip hop awards Puños Arriba. Unfortunately in 2011 the Cuban government decided to insert some non-independent Cuban musicians in the lineup and the original organizers of the event refused, thus

Although these spaces were not directly spawned by the hip hop movement, they are recent phenomena in the Cuban artistic atmosphere.¹⁹⁰ Once again, their appearance has been largely influenced by the opening of the island to foreign investment and tourism, which makes it easier for independent entrepreneurs to access the needed materials and technology to create events of the magnitude of *Rotilla*, or the social networking technology necessary to coordinate the meetings at *El Parque de G*. Extended contact with foreigners allowed individuals in Cuba to learn of similar events in other parts of the world (Burning Man, Woodstock, etc...) and create spaces in the same guise for independent and socially conscious bands who badly needed these events to promote their craft to the population. On the other hand, it was also important for youth in Cuba to have spaces in which to support bands like Los Aldeanos who had gained notoriety and respect among them but who they could rarely see live, not because of economic limits,¹⁹¹ but instead because there are very few spaces owned by the government in which they were allowed to perform.

In short, the surge of bands and artistic styles which were not promoted (or supported) by the government as a result of their critical discourse not only reflected the critical thinking of the population, but also allowed for the creation of economic development within the artistic community in Cuba, as well as for the creation of networks, necessary in the view of censorship.

canceling for the first time the festival since its creation. For further information see the organizer's declaration at <http://rotillafestival.blogspot.com/>

¹⁹⁰ These spaces also allow for an active engagement of the youth with the issues discussed by socially conscious artists. The output of these concerts was determined through the participant's observation method, since the phenomena is quite noticeable to any individual immersed in this sector of Cuba's cultural life. For instance, while very little political and social discussion is undertaken in the concerts by the public, the "morning-after" effect is quite large. Youth in particular and attendees in general usually argue over the validity of the commentary made in the concerts during the following days, using the alternative settings created by the movement.

¹⁹¹ I have attended two shows in which Los Aldeanos performed in Cuba and they have both been free of charge. Furthermore, their usual method of guerrilla appearances hinders the potential for charging. How can one pay if you do not know who will perform?

All of these ramifications had not happened before in the realm of socially conscious music in Cuba, or any type of artistic enterprise for that matter. This is not to say that the musical production of years before was not sufficient to provide incentive for enormous changes within the artistic community and the consequent repercussion in society and youth in particular. However, the political, social and economic conditions had not been sufficient in previous years for these monumental changes to occur.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Special Period in Cuba was (and continues to be) unsettling and fraught with difficulties for the Cuban population. Youth in particular were affected by the policy changes implemented by the government during this time, and as a result became the pioneers of new ways of interacting within the (limited) political sphere.

While civil society came to support these musicians as organic intellectuals, they were not the only ones representing the social situation through art. Films such as *Fresa y Chocolate*¹⁹² and *Lista de Espera*¹⁹³ were created with the purpose of confronting Cuban civil society with problems like the double moral. And they achieved their goal, albeit with considerable initial censorship. It must be noted, however, that these forms of social expression are not generally intended to undermine the socialist character of the Cuban government, but rather in many instances to further it. None of the underground socially conscious musicians call for deregulation or less government intervention. Instead, they demand that the Cuban State provide the social services promised with the revolution with the appropriate quality and to maintain Cuba as a nation for the Cubans, a feature that was made evident through many of the

¹⁹² Directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío (1994).

¹⁹³ Directed by Juan Carlos Tabío (2000).

songs explored in this chapter. In short, Cuban civil society, as expressed through the overwhelming support for these artists, demands a more substantial input in the political realm of the nation and a development of the socialist society.

CHAPTER 5. ANALYSIS AND OVERVIEW OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN CUBA

I. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While the last two chapters of this thesis have been devoted to analyze new ways in which civil society is increasingly engaged in Cuba, especially when exchanging opinions and viewpoints with the Cuban government, this chapter will expand on the role and nature of Cuban civil society. Particular examples of different groups within Cuban civil society will be provided and analyzed in order to develop the central argument of this thesis. Specifically, it argues that Cuban civil society has experienced a great number of changes throughout the revolutionary period, and also that patterns of citizen input have evolved and been transformed in ways allowing members of Cuban cultural circles to become central participants in today's civil society.

The idea of the existence (or lack thereof) of civil society in Cuba is a highly contentious issue, widely debated by academics. As with every other major debate in the political science and social studies realm, the proper conceptualization of civil society must be done before an agreement can be made among academics.¹⁹⁴ This is precisely the first challenge faced in scholarly debate regarding civil society: a number of theorists, ranging from Rousseau¹⁹⁵ to

¹⁹⁴ Refer to pages 6-7 of this thesis for a detailed conceptualization of civil society.

¹⁹⁵ Rousseau argued, much in the Greek tradition, that civil society's highest attainment would be intimately linked to the political society. However, his ideas have been disregarded as "idealistic" by several authors. For instance Walzer argues that this level of political engagement in the citizenry (if it is ever to happen) would hinder other activities in the nation's realm (2003, 25). He argues "the rule of the demos is in significant ways illusory; the participation of ordinary men and women in the activities of the state (unless they are state employees) is largely vicarious; even party militants are more likely to complain than actually to decide" (Walzer, 2003, 11).

Hobbes¹⁹⁶ and Locke,¹⁹⁷ have presented their own specific definitions of civil society and citizen input into the government structure, resulting in a variety of opinions and interpretations in more recent scholarship.¹⁹⁸ Therefore, since the term has not been uniformly defined,¹⁹⁹ it is necessary to define once more what this thesis will refer to as “civil society,” and to comment upon the ways in which this interpretation may be perceived by commentators.

Civil society is thus understood as the space between the government and its citizenry, which can be captured by either society (political and civil) or shared by both. In this manner, civil society conceptualizations by Jacques Rousseau and Antonio Gramsci have been taken into account to interpret today’s civil society reality in Cuba.²⁰⁰ Associations formed with or without the consent of the state in Cuba, as well as informal gatherings of any type known as *peñas* or

¹⁹⁶ Hobbes and Locke embody polar opposites of the conceptualizations of state and society. For Locke, market and private property were central, whereas for Hobbes the rule of law and the state (as stated in *Leviathan*) must exist in a nation in order to provide a framework for society. Hobbes implicitly stated that civil society would be framed by the context of law and the state, and could not exist without it (Shlapentokh, 2003, 983). However, it is worth noting that Hobbes did not, like Rousseau, envision civil society as being intertwined and central to the state. His logic flowed the other way: the state would be central to the existence of civil society.

¹⁹⁷ To Locke, the main purpose of civil society was, in full liberal tradition, the protection of private property. The idea of Locke translating civil society as intimately (and almost uniquely) related to the private sector is still quite present in western liberal societies. However, this conceptualization of the term makes no sense when applied in Cuba, since in it civil society is equated to what Marx would later call “bourgeois society” (Santillana, 2010, 18).

¹⁹⁸ For instance, Allan Wolfe has argued that it really does not matter what the concept had meant in the past as long as it is known in its current meaning (qtd. in Friedman, 2004, 3). Thankfully, other current commentators such as Jean L. Cohen (qtd. in Friedman, 2004, 11) have taken a more active interest in the definition of civil society and its applicability in today’s societies.

¹⁹⁹ This is hardly exclusive of the idea of civil society or citizen input. Instead, it is the case for a large number of terms in the existing scholarship. Most notably, failure to define properly and demarcate terms usually tossed around in the political science field such as “democracy,” “socialism,” or “dictatorship” have resulted in many of the concept’s intended meanings being lost in both scholarship and political discourse.

²⁰⁰ The term civil society appeared for the first time in a Party document in 1996, and from that point onwards articles reflecting on the subject of civil society in Cuba (usually influenced by Gramsci’s thought) appeared in several publications. Examples include “Releyendo a Gramsci: Hegemonía y Sociedad Civil” by Jorge Luis Acanda, published in the widely circulated magazine *Temas* in 1997. For further information see Chanan (2001).

reunions among neighbours, are also to be considered integral parts of civil society. However, it is worth clarifying that civil society, as defined by Gramsci, is a shifting realm. It can become an intrinsic part of political society or not, depending on the specificities of each society. Thus, civil society need not remain in a separate discursive realm from the government structures or the political realm in the island. For instance, Rousseau argued that the concept of civil society would be one in which the state and the individual (conforming civil society associations) would be inextricably mixed together. Indeed, he stated that when the political and the social realm were no longer separated, then civil society would attain their maximum expression. As Roman has expressed:

Rousseau's aim was for society to resume the sovereign power that liberal theory had relegated to the political sphere and thus to foster the unity of civil society and government. To this end, Rousseau argued for a unitary form of government and for the mandate system, both of which exist in Cuba (Roman, 2003, 14).

Rousseau did not argue, however, that organizations receiving some sort of official support or operating in association with the state would not form part of the civil society, or indeed vice versa.²⁰¹ To theorists increasingly relevant to the Cuban intellectual realm such as Gramsci, civil society entailed the space in which hegemony or counter-hegemony would be developed. Civil society was envisioned as a field where different forces would take over and shift with time, intimately linked to the political sphere. Furthermore, he argued that the distinction between political and civil society is purely methodological since “in actual reality civil society and the state are one and the same” (qtd. in Chanan, 2001, 391). Although the

²⁰¹ These arguments have been used in scholarship, as hyperbolic as they may seem. For instance Guerra wonders why the Cuban population has allowed the Castro government to “do away with civil society” (2009, 74).

government would represent the hegemonic forces,²⁰² Gramsci does not exclude from his idea of civil society groups that align with the hegemonic position of the government,²⁰³ which unfortunately is a common occurrence in the scholarship when referring to Cuba.

II. GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN CUBA

To better understand civil society and the level of citizen input in Cuba it becomes necessary - at the very least- to develop a superficial understanding of the way in which the Cuban government has interacted with individual Cuban citizens and associations since the revolutionary victory. While this is an immense topic demanding its own extensive research, a brief overview is warranted by the argument analyzed in this thesis.

The Cuban governmental system is one that, despite constant foreign aggression and media misrepresentations of it as a paralytic and static system, has never remained the same since 1959.²⁰⁴ Furthermore the government has been in a process of constant renovation, and arguably of improvement, for the last half-century.²⁰⁵ Reflecting and influencing governmental

²⁰² The idea of hegemony is defined here as the socially accepted and practiced social, economic and political practices.

²⁰³ Neither does he exclude the anti-hegemonic groups of positions for that matter. In fact, Gramsci states that his conception of civil society is remarkably close to that of Marx when he argues that civil society is not “the spontaneous, automatic expression of economic facts, but a form of state regulation, introduced and maintained by legislative and coercive means” (qtd in Chanan, 2001, 392). When taking into account that in the case of Cuba the state provides the frameworks in which debate will take place, through means of education, public spaces and state-funded cultural projects, this statement is remarkably accurate.

²⁰⁴ For instance, on September 3, 1970 during a CTC meeting, Fidel Castro stated once more the necessity for an increase in local input. Further, he introduced one of the main features of the electoral system that was to remain in place in Cuba for decades to come: the revocability of elected officials at any given time by electors (Roman, 2003, 68).

²⁰⁵ Marcelino Fajardo Delgado states for instance that “civil society and the state in Cuba are not in confrontation to [with] each other, nor are they antagonistic to each other, but rather they interact in a process of mutual cohesion (qtd. In Friedman, 2005, 10). While this is representative of the ideals of the socialist revolution, the reality is less cohesive, although it still adheres to these principles. As argued by Friedman in the context of the Special Period, “the changes and

changes are citizen input and civil society interactions with the government. The population's involvement in the Cuban political processes cannot be taken for granted nor disregarded as "brain-washing"²⁰⁶ since it is central in maintaining the legitimacy and hegemony of the government, partially in light of decades of aggression from the United States. Engaging the citizenship in what the Cuban government argues constitutes a duty of each citizen is crucial for the state in order to develop and protect the nation in the political, economic and social realms. The current Cuban government has attempted to involve the population in the political processes through a large number of referenda, congresses and *rendiciones de cuentas*,²⁰⁷ ranging from neighbourhood and municipal level to national inquiry.²⁰⁸ Given the fact that there are 14 provinces and 169 municipalities in the country (Roman, 2003, 73) the amount and diversity of the input provided is considerable.

Perhaps one of the most visible referenda took place in 2002, when the Cuban government put forward a motion to make a socialist system of government permanent in the

compromises that have been required to manage the current crisis have diluted the ideal of solidarity as market mechanisms, consumerism and individualism have made inroads into civil society creating conflict, jealousy, inequality and mistrust" (Friedman, 2005,10).

²⁰⁶ The argument of communist brainwashing is also widely used both in scholarship and the media when referring to Cuban civil society. The hierarchy that existing powers have created regarding political systems states that only in a liberal democratic western capitalist nation can society be free, educated and "civil" enough to actively and meaningfully participate in political and social processes. This argument has several flaws. For instance, it assumes the organization of the existing hierarchy and asserts that the western capitalist system is the correct and, arguably only accepted one among nations. This is of course a fallacy. Further, it does not allow for individual countries to develop indigenous governmental or economic systems suitable to the specificities required by their populations.

²⁰⁷ In these *rendiciones de cuentas* the citizenry talks to a delegado or delegate in meetings dedicated to expose individual problems to a specific representative, who is supposed to solve them (Roman, 2003, 202).

²⁰⁸ "The municipal assembly has no legislative powers: these lie solely with the National Assembly. The municipal assembly analyzes, discusses, supervises, monitors, inspects and controls the social, economic, judicial and political affairs of the municipality. It also selects administrators for local enterprises and entities (such as stores and polyclinics) and participates in formulating the municipal economic budget and plan, which it must approve" (Roman, 2003, 73).

island.²⁰⁹ Although in this particular instance 99% of the population participated, international commentators interpreted the large turnout as the government machine “forcing” the Cuban population to vote in a specific way. This is indeed a very simplistic argument, but one that has been used extensively when debating civil society in Cuba and its interactions with the government.

Despite rather superficial western portrayals of its political structure, in its behaviour the Cuban government has been impressively democratic.²¹⁰ It is worth stating that this thesis does not seek to contend that there are instances of the western liberal model which are wrong,²¹¹ but instead to argue that specific nations demand specific political systems and relationships between civil society and the government, in which external actors have no legal right in intervening or influencing. Cuba has implemented its own model of democracy, which is not liberal, and it has adjusted to the particularities of the country following a dictum by José Martí: *el vino de plátano es agrio, pero es nuestro vino* (Martí, 1891, 59).²¹²

The relationship in Cuba between government and civil society during the early years of the revolution was particularly intimate. Because of the government’s youth and their lack of expertise, the *barbudos* relied heavily on the population to achieve the revolution’s goals, as well

²⁰⁹ For more information see the article “Cuba Backs Permanent Socialism,” found at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/2069057.stm>.

²¹⁰ The concept of democracy in this thesis is used in the most classic sense of the word, with one of its central features being Rousseau’s so-called “idealistic” conception of full and direct civilian input in the state decision-making, as understood in the Gramscian concept of “socialist civil society” (Friedman, 2005, 9). Departing from this idea, the emphasis on direct political and social involvement in Cuba create a balance among the participative elements in the decision-making in the island (Welp, 2009, 39).

²¹¹ “Right” and “wrong” are moral categories that have no place in an analytical essay. Further, It can be argued that there is no fixed hierarchy regarding political systems in the modern world, just policies that fulfill citizens’ expectations or not. It is with this larger framework that I analyze the situation of the civil society in Cuba and the representations made of the system in the international media are analyzed.

²¹² “Wine made of bananas may be bitter, but it is our wine.”

as to channel the revolutionary fever that had infected the country. Inclusion of the population in the political process during the 1960s included open trials for criminals²¹³ and Fidel Castro's "moving office."²¹⁴ Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, however, the level of political involvement between the Cuban population and its leaders diminished consistently, especially at the higher levels. The delegates and other forms of neighbourhood and even municipal involvement maintained normal levels of participation, but the lack of accountability and power of the delegates impeded any significant progress in resolving the problems of Cuban individuals (Resolución, 1991, np).²¹⁵ This is a key point in terms of criticism concerning citizens' input: while the government continued to encourage an exchange of opinions between civil society and the state, it was doing so in ways in which the citizen would only talk about their problems in the limited realm of the neighbourhood or the municipality where he or she resided, instead of debating national issues such as economic policies or political actions.²¹⁶ LeoGrande summarizes well this situation as noted in Roman (2003, 159):

²¹³ These trials are quite controversial in the international media. Once Fidel Castro and the rest of the revolutionaries established themselves in the Cuban capital, the population demanded justice (or vengeance) for the damage done to Cuban families by the Batista government (which killed tens of thousands of Cubans during its time in power). To avoid a potentially disastrous situation in the island, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro staged these massive trials in open baseball stadiums in Havana. In them, individuals would step forward and state their case against the defended. The sentence would be achieved in the same stadium, and many times it ended in death by firing squad in La Cabaña under the supervision of Che Guevara. While Che Guevara and the revolutionary government have been vilified for this method of justice, there are few credible sources stating that these executions were against "innocent people." For more information see Chapter 25 of *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* by Jon Lee Anderson.

²¹⁴ Fidel Castro would drive around the country in a jeep with a team of advisors, talking directly with the population and trying to resolve their problems.

²¹⁵ Indeed, Roman (2003) states that "resolving planteamientos by citizens does not necessarily mean solving them. It may mean explaining to the constituent's satisfaction why they cannot be solved."

²¹⁶ For instance, the citizens in *rendición de cuentas* would only refer to immediate and individual problems such as a lack of a functioning refrigerator or access to water (Roman, 2003, 231). This has been criticized by other authors such as Rabkin (qtd. in Roman, 2003, 168) who

The major limitation on popular input to decision making seems to be the limitations of the local Organs of People's Power in the overall policy-making process. The municipal OPP deals exclusively with local issues. The criticism and suggestions generated at the accountability sessions tend to be "concrete," aimed at local problems. The sessions, for the most part, have not been forums for criticizing or even discussing major national policy, since such issues fall outside the jurisdiction of the local OPP.

While these sorts of discussion are necessary for lower levels of governments in order to maintain delegates accountable to the citizenry at the closest level possible, there should also be venues to encourage the individual citizen to express their views on national government policy and to be listened to directly.²¹⁷ In fact, these spaces have been created within the Cuban government and political structures recently, although not with enough frequency. One of these instances was the request for the population to debate several points and guidelines which were to be discussed during the *IV Congreso del PCC*.²¹⁸ The citizens were encouraged to read the agenda and the rest of the documents to be discussed, and submit their opinions to the government. In fact, the results of this congress shaped the policy Cuban adopted during the 1990s. For instance, the continuous efforts that have been made in later years to grant more

argued that while the current Cuban government is eager to promote debate on the services and other such subjects, it is more reticent to encourage it in terms of policy and economic fundamentals.

²¹⁷ This sort of direct government democracy is both difficult to achieve and not necessarily sanctioned or implemented in western democracies, but given the fact that it has been done in the island, it is not unreasonable to expect it.

²¹⁸ 4th Communist Party Congress.

The document requesting debate was released on March 18th 1990, providing plenty of time for the population to discuss the matters at hand before the Congress, taking place between October 10th and 14th of the same year in the city of Santiago de Cuba. In the call for debate the "dishonest effort of achieving unanimity" was discouraged, and instead a "favourable environment for the promotion of creative thinking and fruitful debate" was encouraged. Subjects mostly centred around the improvement of the social, cultural and economic situation of the Cuban population, and allowed for a wide framework of debate. For more information regarding the Congress and the call to debate please refer to <http://congresopcc.cip.cu/congresos/iv-congreso-pcc>

autonomous powers to local administrative struggles is a continuation of the arguments and resolutions presented in the IV Congress:

“La existencia de una estructura compleja y poco ágil para la actividad operativa de la administración local, entre otros inconvenientes, limita la posibilidad de que las asambleas ejerzan debidamente su función de dirección y puedan actuar como contrapartida de las entidades administrativas” (Resolución, 1991, np).²¹⁹

A more recent instance of the government making a conscious effort to involve the general population in the macropolitical and economic decision-making was the debate surrounding the *Proyecto de Lineamientos de la Política Económica y Social* taking place on the year 2010. After having a number of working groups preparing for the creation of this document in specific areas (economics, social policy, investing, etc...), the final product was printed in sufficient numbers and distributed to the population to acquire feedback on the proposals, which would consequently be presented during the VI Communist Party Congress.²²⁰ However, while both these instances constitute a great step in the implementation of a more open and constant discourse between the government and civil society - and while important insights were acquired through the active involvement of the Cuban population - they were to an extent insufficient and arguably sporadic.

²¹⁹ “The existence of a structure in the realm of cooperative activity in local administration that is complex and cumbersome, among many other drawbacks, limits the assembly’s possibilities of properly exercising their directive function. Further, in this manner they are also hindered in their performance as counterparts of administrative entities.”

²²⁰ As a result of the feedback received regarding the Lineamientos, important changes are underway in Cuba. In the document “Resolución sobre los Lineamientos de la Política Económica y Social del Partido y la Revolución,” produced as a result of the VI Communist Party Congress, it is stated that “the [socialist] model will recognize and promote, in addition to the socialist state enterprise, other modalities of foreign investment, cooperatives, small farmers, usufructuary individuals, home renters, and other self-employed individuals that could arise in order to contribute to efficiency.” Furthermore, acknowledgement of the “disorganization, bureaucracy, paternalism and lack of provisions and demands” that exist in the Cuban government was reflected in a similar resolution entitled “Resolución Sobre el Informe Central VI Congreso del PCC.” Both documents can be found at <http://www.pcc.cu/cong6.php>

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The artistic modes of civilian input in Cuba have been sufficiently discussed in previous chapters, and therefore it is necessary to refer to interpretations made on other sectors conforming civil society in the island, as well as interpretations made by outside commentators on the subject.

Criticisms regarding inclusive interpretations of civil society in Cuba are pervasive, and they must be taken into account when analyzing new ways in which Cuban society interacts with the government, and citizens provide political and social input. For instance, a great number of authors state that since many of the civil organizations in Cuba are recognized by the Cuban government, they cannot be counted as part of civil society. Otero and O'Bryan for example argue that only the groups opposing the current government are to be considered when referring to civil society in Cuba (2002, 34). Dissident²²¹ groups within the island thus take the main stage as the only instance of manifestation of civil society.

While this view is widespread in the scholarship (see Guerra 2009 and Fernández 2003), especially that being written outside of Cuba, it contains several problems that must be addressed to further the argument of this thesis. Firstly, this interpretation is usually presented as a Cuban exception, when it is really not. Groups constituting civil society in other nations can never exist in complete dissociation from their own government. In Canada for instance, NGOs and other groups conforming civil society must seek government grants (usually through CIDA) in order to

²²¹ “Dissident” is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “disagreeing specially with an established religious or political system, organization, or belief.” There is no referral to the persecution or any other political relevance of the term that has been imbued in it by the media when referring to these groups in Cuba. For further information please refer to: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dissident>.

fund their enterprises whether at home or abroad.²²² The argument has been made by many scholars in the field of development studies that this hinders the level of engagement of the NGO and the society it seeks to represent, since the dependence on funds creates the “upwards accountability” referred to in earlier chapters. Therefore, Cuba is not an exceptional case, since many of its organizations are dependent on the government for support, monetary and otherwise. Furthermore, this outlook completely ignores the rest of the population in Cuba as individuals - or groups - with political and social agency. Indeed, it rules out alternative ways of thinking about the relationship between the Cuban government and society except dissidence or confrontation. It must thus be concluded this is not a helpful or accurate representation of the present situation in the island.

Civil society in Cuba is, to say the least, vibrant. A large number of organizations exist: those that are supported by or supportive of the current government (ANAP,²²³ CDRs,²²⁴ FEU,²²⁵ FMC,²²⁶ UNEAC²²⁷), and those that are dissident or largely critical such as the Ladies in White,

²²² Canadian NGOs as large as Oxfam and as small as Change for Children Canada heavily depend on CIDA grants in order to fulfill their mandate. CIDA was the single largest source of revenue for Oxfam during 2011. For further information and sources refer to Oxfam's 2011 Statement of Financial Position at <http://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/imce/financial-summary-2011.pdf>

²²³ Asociación Nacional de Agricultores Pequeños or National Association of Small Farmers was created on May 17th 1961 during the First PCC Congress. It represents individuals taking part in co-op associations, farmers and their families.

For further information regarding ANAP please refer to <http://www.campesinocubano.anap.cu>

²²⁴ Comités de Defensa de la Revolución or Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. They are one of the central structures of both civil and political society in the island, and it is arguably the organization with the largest membership. They were created on September 28th 1960 as a response to aggressions prompted by the United States at the start of the revolutionary period.

²²⁵ Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios or Federation of University Students. The membership of this organization has been historically active in the political and social realm in Cuba, not only confined to campus. Given the large number of youth enrolled in post-secondary education in the island, this is a fairly extensive organization.

²²⁶ Federación de Mujeres Cubanas or Federation of Cuban Women. Recognized as an NGO, it has been essential in advancing gender equalization and health improvement for women ever since its creation in 1960. Its membership includes 82.5% of all eligible women over 14 years of

bloggers, artistic associations and the so-called alternative libraries. Of them, organizations created with the approval of the state and functioning with its continuous support are usually regarded as governmental extensions in the scholarship. Others are supported directly by the U.S. government, thereby revealing their lack of autonomy. However, these groups participate in autonomous meetings and in many cases propose independent alternatives to government policy. Conversely, there are a large number of movements and associations that are not dependent or even supportive of the current government, without necessarily being opposed to the main tenets of the revolution, or being in consortium with external powers as is the case for most of the dissident circles. These associations include the underground hip hop movement and other cultural associations rarely mentioned in the scholarship referring to civil society in Cuba as autonomous groups. Instead, they are usually lumped together as some amorphous and barely visible entity: “the artists.” These groups are, in one way or another, representative of the interests and concerns of a large numbers of Cubans living in the island, as explained in previous chapters. Nevertheless, the dissident associations, however small and largely irrelevant in the national context, are the most frequently mentioned in the scholarship as the only real civil society groups in the island, and further, the only way in which the real desires of the Cuban population are shown. This is clearly not the case. Moreover, as this thesis has sought to show, there are indeed other significant representatives of civil society that are far more powerful - and more relevant.

age. Further, it is not funded by the Cuban government. For further information refer to http://www.stanford.edu/group/womenscourage/communitybasedsolutions/the_federation_of_cuban_women.html

²²⁷ Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba or Union Cuban Writers and Artists. This organization has been central in the development of cultural and political rights in Cuba. It was created on August 22nd 1961 with the objective of preserving social justice and national independence. Its membership comprises writers and artists of all sorts within the island, and the organization has gained II Consultive Status in the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. For further information refer to <http://www.uneac.org.cu>

In previous chapters dissident groups have been referred to in passing. However, information regarding their activities is central to the development of this project as a whole. While some of the arguments why this particular sector cannot be the only one taken into account when analyzing civil society in the island have already been stated, several remain. Arguably, the most important is the association of these groups with foreign nations²²⁸ in order to completely overthrow - or change- not the government itself, but the entire governmental system in Cuba.²²⁹ Furthermore, even if the idea of changing the governmental system in the island had arisen from within the citizenship without any sort of instigation from external powers,²³⁰ it is not representative enough of the rest of the Cuban population. Taking into account that the United States has undertaken an ideological and economic war on Cuba,²³¹ political intervention

²²⁸ These external powers range from the United States, whose Congress devotes tens of millions of dollars every year in order to support the activities of these groups in Cuba, to Spain and other countries within the European Union, who have granted distinctions, notoriety and funds to Cuban dissidents (Agee, 2003, np).

²²⁹ The socialist character of the Cuban state was ratified through a 2002 amendment to the 1976 Cuban Constitution. A number of commentators outside the island equate this move to yet another way in which the Castro government sought to make itself “untouchable,” and as a response to the “threat” posed by the presentation of the Varela Project to the Cuban state for review (Blanco, 2002, 31). What many fail to notice is that the proposal was submitted to the Cuban population for approval before being enshrined in the Constitution, and approved by an overwhelming majority of Cubans.

²³⁰ This is not the case. The U.S. government has funded and implemented a great number of programs in order to “promote democracy” in Cuba. The general numbers are reflected in each year’s congressional budgets, and then distributed to USAID and other agencies for them to distribute in turn to specific groups looking to overthrow the current government both within the island and abroad. For further information refer to the U.S. 2011 Congressional Budget and Agee (2003, np).

²³¹ See Trading with the Enemy Act, as applied to Cuba and North Korea. The subject to which the act is applicable is defined as following:

Sec. 2. That the word “enemy,” as used herein, shall be deemed to mean, for the purposes of such trading and of of this Act -

- a. Any individual, partnership, or other body of individuals, of any nationality, resident within the territory (including that occupied by the military and naval forces) of any nation with which the United States is at war, or resident outside the United States and doing business within such territory, and any corporation incorporated within such territory of any nation

of this magnitude with groups within the island could be legally equated with treason, since it infringes on the established constitution of the country.

While many authors, especially those writing from Florida and elsewhere in the U.S., argue for these groups to be autonomous from the Cuban government in order to rationalize them as integral components of civil society, individuals within the groups themselves have stated in several interviews that they routinely receive what they term as “help” from the U.S., as well as other nations, usually members of the European Union.²³² In this context, Reynaldo Taladrid wondered what would happen if the Cuban government would approve a budget to overthrow the government in the United States and funded socialist and leftist groups within the United States in order to do so. Would the action be considered legitimate and those groups accepted as the only civil society in the U.S.? The answer clearly is no.²³³

Groups also regarded in the scholarship as central to the civil society discussion in Cuba include the Catholic Church,²³⁴ and independent cultural organizations comprising libraries run

with which the United States is at war or incorporated within any country other than the United States and doing business within such territory.

For further information regarding the Trading with the Enemy Act and subsequent bills amending it, refer to the Library of Congress website at <http://www.loc.gov>

²³² U.S. citizens are not necessarily aware of the destination of these funds. Several journalists have recently taken on projects to clarify the destination of the “democracy-building” programs which the U.S. government implements in Cuba and elsewhere as part of their foreign policy strategy. One of the most relevant studies to Cuba has been undertaken by Tracey Eaton through the Cuba Money Project. In it, he talks to dissidents and political commentators both on the island and abroad, and conducts primary research that is later posted on his website <http://cubamoneyproject.org>. Through several of these interviews the economic transfers from the U.S. government to the dissident groups in Cuba can be understood. For a very relevant example, refer to Tracey Eaton’s interview with Oswaldo Payá (one of the creators of the Varela Project) at <http://vimeo.com/24140176>

²³³ See full interview at <http://alongthemalecon.blogspot.com/2011/07/interview-with-reinaldo-taladrid-part-1.html>

²³⁴ One of the most useful articles referring to the part played by the Catholic Church and other religious organizations in Cuban civil society is authored by Dilla and Oxhorn (1999). While they refer to the influence of the traditionally conservative Catholic Church in Cuba, they also

by dissidents and other groups. While these groups receive substantial international coverage, they carry very little weight among the Cuban population. Conversely, cultural associations and individual underground artists carry a level of legitimacy in the representation of the desires of the population, and comparison between them and the identification of the population with the government can be established during the early years of the revolution.

In conclusion, while the current leadership of the Cuban government has actively attempted to develop the political engagement of the citizenship for the last three decades in order to achieve the high levels in involvement prevalent during the earlier revolutionary years, the effort has been insufficient. The Cuban government strives for the sort of civil society envisioned by Rousseau and Gramsci and explained by Colletti in the following terms:

This resumption signifying in fact the suppression of the division before civil "society" and civil "government" or "civil" society and "political" society....is expressed on the one hand in the unification (against the "division of powers") of government and parliament, of executive and legislature; and on the other, in their "common reduction" to mere "commissions" or "working" functions, which society not only requires some of its members to do (in the same way as with all other work functions), but which are carried out on behalf of and under the direct control of the mandators (the theory of the mandat impératif) who retain full power to the effect their immediate "recall." (Colletti qtd. in Roman, 2003, 14).

Nevertheless, while this objective was achieved for a short time during the 1960s, it has withered away in a significant way particularly during the last twenty years. During this time, youth and the cultural associations representative of their interests have interiorized the responsibility of promotion for civic input, and engaged the government in a meaningful discourse regarding social and political events on the island.

state the widespread importance of the Afro-Cuban cults among the population to achieve local development and political involvement.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has argued that Cuban socially conscious musicians can be understood as the organic intellectuals envisioned by Antonio Gramsci; these musicians have claimed a relevant position within the Cuban civil society. This phenomenon, no matter how underrepresented in media coverage and scholarship, is one that carries great importance with the Cuban population and government.

While in many instances the concepts of art and state have not been interrelated in the scholarship, artists in Cuba and around the world have proven their immense power to mobilize the people. In the case of Cuba specifically, musicians have put forward arguments and ideas for civil society to debate and reflect upon. Furthermore, they have managed to engage the most politically-apatetic sector of society in social discourse: youth.

Cuban artists have grown into social and political spokespersons for Cuban youth in particular during the revolutionary period. Additionally, they have assumed the roles of diplomats, cultural ambassadors, social innovators and mass educators. Although the same could be said about artists in other parts of the world, the impressive and remarkably different defining characteristic of Cuban artists is, as noted throughout the thesis, their continuous involvement with the Cuban population and their identification with the people at all possible levels of society.

Culturally, Cuban artists have meshed into a hybrid featuring the intrinsically underground in form and content while attracting a mainstream, popular following. Any artist would recognize that this is a very difficult feat to achieve. However, the historical, political,

social and economic circumstances that exist in Cuba have made it possible not just for one band, but for an entire movement.

It is very difficult to argue categorically (at least without falling into a simplistic trap) that socially conscious artists in Cuba represent the desires of the Cuban population at large. Conversely however, it can be stated that these artists represent the expectations of the youngest sectors of the Cuban population, a feature that is reflected in the large number of listeners they gather in their concerts on and off the island²³⁵. Most importantly however, is the way in which the popular culture in the streets of the island is being redefined by these artists' discourse regarding the political system and the social situation. Their relevance and permanence is all the more telling given the substantial changes the Cuban society has undergone during the last ten years and continues to experience today. Furthermore, their continued relevance in this context suggest their discourse is never static, and instead it continuously transforms with and discusses the emerging discourses and ideas from both the political and the civil society on the island.

The Cuban government has dealt in a number of ways with emerging artistic social movements, as reflected throughout this thesis. However, cultural brokers such as Haydée Santamaría at *Casa de las Américas* and currently the Minister of Culture Abel Prieto, appear central in the development of government policy regarding these movements. Since the Grey Years of the 1970s, the response trend from the Cuban government has increasingly been at best one of cooperation with emerging artists, and at worst the withdrawal of economic support and government endorsement. While this last option may have seemed harsh in years previous to

²³⁵ See for instance the large number of attendees in their concerts in Miami and Colombia. Unfortunately due to extremely bad coverage among the media of these events, it is really difficult to have a specific number of attendees in Cuba. However, personal observations suggest attendance is considerable. Perhaps one of the most well known and illuminating examples was the breaking of a theatre door (Teatro Karl Marx) in Havana by the public who was not able to obtain tickets to the sold out Buena Fé concert last year.

2000, the creation of alternative spaces that the economic opening in Cuba has warranted, has substantially alleviated the blow to young artists. Further, it can be argued that their exclusion from governmental institutions contributes to their popularity among the population. Indeed, in the same way that many artists in western societies rely on their “indie” credibility to market their music (i.e. portray an image of originality and independence versus the possibility of being “sell outs”), Cuban musicians assert their political and social ideas in both content and form by not participating in government activities, and by increasingly creating their own social spaces.

Although the importance of socially conscious music in any society must not be understated, it is important to re-emphasize the reasons why Cuban youth has been attracted to this emerging form of civic input instead of making use of the mechanisms put in place by the government. First, as stated before, the gap between the governmental discourse and the reality in the Cuban average neighbourhood has not been successfully breached by the Cuban state. Thus, the youth was prompted to become entangled with other ways of expressing their reality to the governmental structures. Furthermore, the mechanisms implemented by the government, especially at the municipal and lower levels were largely ineffectual in responding to the problems of the population, mainly as a result of the lack of economic resources that permeates the country. Socially conscious musicians mostly provided an outlet for the frustration without promising change, but by stating the challenges that were present in every-day society to a much larger audience. Throughout the last five years, as demonstrated through the *Proyecto de Lineamientos* and its results in Chapter 5, the Cuban government has had at its disposal more means to address some of the problems on the island, and as a result a continuous flux of changes is emanating from the legislative authorities. However, the importance of socially conscious musicians does not seem to wane in the presence of a more attuned government.

As argued in previous chapters, socially conscious musicians can currently be found anywhere in the world. However, the influence that Cuban artists demand on the island is truly unique. Thus, the analysis of culture in Cuba must be further integrated in the scholarship in order to fully understand the dynamics between civil society and government. Indeed, debate surrounding Cuban political processes and social involvement has been prolific, albeit somewhat biased. Interpretations have disregarded vast sectors of the population while granting importance to minuscule and largely ineffectual groups within society. In this context, the main objective of this thesis has been to describe and analyze a vibrant and active sector of Cuban civil society. The analysis of socially conscious musicians and their impact on civil society is currently lacking a strong presence in the existing scholarship.

In short, while these artists cannot be said to be the only, nor the most important, members of a civil society as diverse and vibrant as that of Cuba, they contribute to the creation of innovative ways in which civil society can develop links with the political society. These forms of non-traditional citizen input are difficult to measure in a precise manner, but nevertheless influence society in a widespread and meaningful way.

Music may not stop the tank, said Carlos Varela, but maybe, it will be able to touch the heart of the driver.

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