

# The Civic Plaza became The Plaza of the Revolution

**T**he lexicon changed rapidly; starting with the monuments; then the streets and parks, the hotels, the values, and finishing with the ways people have come to think. And I say it changed so as not to delve too deep into whether it was or was not a preconceived plan by someone with a desire for the revolution to be a total transformation, and therefore so meticulously carried out and so carefully planned, that it would make it both a poetic and an inhuman act. However, the man who ordered such a radical and profound transformation is not the focus of this essay.

The purpose of the essay is to suggest that this substitution has molded the people's perceptions, conceptual ability, and emotions. Ideology communicated as government slogans, and directives, which are a linguistic act, become manifest in both individual and collective behavioral patterns.

These considerations on whether it is possible for a language to be changed effectively enough to affect behavior and linguistics debate around this topic that arose during the nineteen-fifties in the Soviet Union are well-known in the field of linguistics. We make reference here to the debate that went on in those years between the Russian formalists who defined language as an integrated grammatical system and a basic vocabulary resistant to change, which if it were suddenly changed, the changes would create social chaos; and considered language as a supra-structure which, just as the economic supra-structure, could be changed once the ideological base changed.

The economic plan conceived by Stalin needed a formula to penetrate the collective unconscious making ideology immediately accessible to the nation, and what better way than through language; which is the means of human communication *sine qua non*? See the debate in *Pravda* initiated in Moscow, June 1950 with the authorization and active participation of Stalin and the compilation by J.V. Stalin. *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*. Pekin: Foreign Language Press, 1972.)

Also discussed in the debate were ideas on the hegemony of class dialects in terms of establishing a common language, or the survival of the national language, or the hegemonic common language above class dialects. In fact, it was observed that through time the dominant dialect would come to absorb the other dialects, the penetration of vocabulary being more common than new grammatical structures. This takes place without the elimination of the common language, but rather by it becoming more robust.

Language is also perceived as a living organism, evolving as it adopts new forms and discards others, not without disappearing completely from the common language, after many years. Nevertheless, the passing of time is not sufficient to make these forms disappear. Thusly, language appears as one of the social manifestations most resistant to substitution. Just as it is with a poetic image, for we speak of the history of metaphors as we speak of the etymology of words and of historical linguistics, and, as it was suggested by Cuban writer, José Lezama Lima, images have their origin in "imaginary eras".

In Cuba, as it is in any other nation, language and literature narrate

the social, political, psychological and emotional history of the people. That is why when reading a novel written in the XIXth century with the vocabulary and the social structures of that century indelibly captured in it, it appears to us as if we were living the era, and it is almost as if we had a memory of having lived then, since we still possess vestiges of those words, of those gestures, which reverberate in us as distant, but familiar sounds. The words and the images are nurtured by memories,



by objective or affective associations they produce by the connotations that define them, by time and usage; that is why they are so resistant.

Substitution is the essence of the creative act, that which has not been created originates in creation itself, the other alternative is nothingness, and the

gratuitous act (guaranteed by liberty), in which case the substitution becomes total - it becomes something else. The historical context and the philosophical origins of the Cuban revolution, were those where from nothing something new was built; something radically new. Then the destruction and devastation razed. The government confiscated and shut down newspapers, radio stations and schools, and established a political monologue. Religious proselytizing was forbidden, artistic and literary censorship was instituted (in an effort to control the plastic image), visits by foreign emissaries and scholars were limited in order to prevent ideological diversionism, political and economic alternatives, or conceptual and philosophical contamination.

The cities were filled with posters and signs. The walls and fences captured the slogans and directives repeated time and time again in the media. The words and the lengthy monologues of the maximum leader dominated the airwaves anxious to proclaim his ideology so his experimental and very personal political and economic plan would succeed, although disastrous for the country .

But as Lezama Lima suggests, language and image resisted, and nothingness was filled with voices and images that were difficult to eradicate, exhibiting the same resistance. But, if the social and economic plans were costly, the linguistic plan was no less costly. The plan has been conscientiously and somewhat successfully carried out in spite of the resistance of language to change, and modern communications.

It was not the national language that was substituted. It was the "bourgeois" dialect, idealist and liberal, attempting its defeat and absorption, altering and in many instances falsifying through the media, and in the classrooms, the denotative schemes of words, and concepts, although not succeeding in their total annihilation, until now. For example, the substitution of "mister" for "comarade", "nation" for "revolution", "democracy" for "socialism", "individual initiative" for "orienta-

tion” or “directive”, among others.

The resistance exhibited by the language might also be due to the proximity and permanence, to the conscious effort of the opposition, the exiles, and dissidents who resisted being charmed by Castro’s communist incantations, indoctrination, and propaganda, remaining faithful to the concepts of liberty and rights against the powers of the state. Or, it might be due to the deep-rooted Hispanic heritage spanning more than five-hundred years, or to the French and North-American influences, or to the country’s strong social, political, and economic development before the revolution. It might also be due to the failure of the Marxist model, or to its application, or to Castroism. However, the truth is, as it has always been the case with language as with literature, keenly pointed out by Stalin costing the Russian professors their jobs to suggest the opposite, that images and metaphors last and linger, dialects survive and so does ideology. But, being the efficient dictator he was, he established a wicked plan of deculturation and social and economic substitution that would cost Russia, according to the latest numbers, millions of deaths.

While all of the above is true, because of its permanence of almost fifty years in Cuba, and because of the ongoing and relentless policies of ideological and thematic exclusion, the Marxist-Leninist-Castroist ideology has left its mark in the national ideary, as it has in its vocabulary and its literature.

The images and the language of the last fifty years will share the imaginary and linguistic space of the Cuban people as have the images and vocabulary of the “roaring twenties”, of the nineteenth century, and of the Renaissance. The national language will have been nurtured by new words, other words, other meanings; and some would have been discarded and abandoned, and the substitutions and the adjustments would have been made, in spite of persecution, censorship, and dispersion.