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Literacy and Liberation

In Che Guevara’s essay, *On Art and Revolution*, he writes, “people have for a long time been trying to free themselves from alienation through culture and art” (117). Guevara goes on to explain that with the rise of capitalism and the grueling demands of the labor force, people crave art and culture as a means of spiritual escapism due to their repressed individuality. However, this kind of artistic expression holds its roots in alienation and thus does not represent true liberation. The goal of a cultural revolution should be to create art which educates and brings together the people, and art which reflects a common goal; to bring about a social reality with minimal conflicts and contradictions (Guevara 117). The events of the Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961 in the nascent period of the Cuban revolution, illustrate how a revolutionary culture emerges from the struggle for liberation. While it did not promote the creation of art in its classical definition, it introduced a new appreciation for the art of teaching, and the art of literature.

The Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961 emerged as a result of the revolution and overthrow of military dictator Batista to become one of the most culturally impactful movements of the era. The campaign gave the younger generation a sense of purpose, women the ability to separate from their prescribed futures as home makers and wives, and it increased Cuba’s literacy level to nearly one hundred percent. This cultural shift is illustrated in the film *Maestras* by Catherine Murphy, as it documents the lives of the hundreds of thousands of young men and women, but mostly women, who traveled to the rural parts of the country to teach those who had never gotten the opportunity to learn how to read and write. A more literate population would not necessarily elucidate or solve the country’s social and economic struggles, however it created a sense of liberation for both the teachers and the students of the campaign.

Over 700,000 Cubans learned to read and write over the course of the campaign, meaning that nearly a million more people were now able to obtain the knowledge of important literary figures, such as Gandhi or Marx (Murphy 30:50-30:58). The literacy teachers, who were mostly young people from the city, worked for the campesinos on their farms during the day, gaining an appreciation for their work and culture. Then, at night, they would teach the campesinos. As many of the women in the film state, they formed almost familial bonds with the campesinos, and what resulted was a deeper understanding and connection with one another. Their cultures were shared, and people on both sides were gaining new experiences.

All the while, the Bay of Pigs Invasion and American insurgents caused the literary teachers to experience a great amount of danger during their time with the campaign and witness first-hand the effects of American imperialism. Murphy tells us, “The sense of danger became even more real when one literacy teacher, Manuel Ascunce, was killed by the insurgents” (17:10-18:20). His death, and the looming threat of the insurgents, solidified those young women’s sense of purpose with their teaching. There were people who wanted to restrain laborers from liberating themselves through literature and art, and the literacy teachers were risking their lives for their right to that liberation. Not only was it liberating for the campesinos to finally be exposed to literature, it was liberating for the young women who taught them to be exposed to a life outside of what was expected of them.

At this point in time, women were predisposed to a life of motherhood and homemaking, as that had been the cultural norm since before the revolution. Now, those who had become literacy teachers were not only fighting for the campesinos right for educational liberation, they were fighting for their own right for female liberation as well. Many of the women interviewed in Murphy’s film stated that they later on became teachers, or professors themselves, creating a new sense of culture amongst women. They were no longer valuable to society simply for the sake of their bodies, but for their minds and intellect. Many of the young women went against their families’ wishes to join the literacy campaign, even some had to forge their parents’ signatures in order to be allowed to leave (Murphy3:30-3:40). For many it would be their first feeling of freedom, as it would be their first time away from home, and many would appreciate that feeling of independence. After the campaign ended, as one woman in the film stated, they realized that they could aim higher in life. “I didn’t have to settle for the future my mom planned for me. I could aspire for more” (Murphy 29:08-29:18). A sense of women’s liberation was experienced through the art of teaching, as the young women who had become literacy teachers realized that their future did not have to be the same as their mothers’. It was revolutionary for women to see that their own goals and aspirations, their own independence and freedom, was entirely possible.

Because of the Cuban Literacy Campaign, the amount of literate people in Cuba rose to nearly one hundred percent. In 1962, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) certified that the nation was entirely free of illiteracy, and Cuba still to this day has one of the highest literacy rates in the Western Hemisphere (Murphy 30:58-31:14). It’s undeniable that the impact of the campaign has been long lasting, and that it was ultimately successful in its goal to promote education, and to emphasize the importance of literature. There was a cultural shift in regards to the importance of education as a result of liberation, and there were more people obtaining important intellectual resources. In regards to Guevara’s disapproval of art being used as a form of escapism from labor, literature was being taught not to distract the workers from their daily lives, but to promote connection, understanding, and solidarity amongst them, which was a successful step in the right direction. The Cuban Literacy Campaign made way for intellectual liberation through the practice of education, and, vice versa, giving way to a new cultural revolution of art being used as a form of expression in reciprocal expression and pursuit of liberation.

Works Cited

Murphy, Catherine. “Maestra - The Women of Cuba’sNational Literacy Campaign.”Kanopy, berkeley.kanopy.com/product/maestra-0.

Guevara, Che. “On Art and Revolution.”Translatedby John Beverly, accessed 30thApril, 2021.