

# Constructing identities in a contested setting: Cuba's intellectual elite during and after the Revolution

by Kepa Artaraz

**Abstract:** This article explores the ways in which oral histories serve a process of constructing collective identities along the boundaries of what is politically possible. The article emerges from a study of the role of the intellectual in 1960s Cuba, using oral history interviews with protagonists of the revolutionary period. The article argues that the exploration of oral history material is a historically situated phenomenon that – in the case of highly politicised contexts – also needs to take into account the political limits of expression. Referring to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, the article argues that a theoretically framed reading of interview material may bring contextual meaning, and provide ways of understanding how roles and identities change over time.

**Keywords:** Cuban oral history; intellectual elite; New Left; collective identity; publishing

In studying the role of intellectuals in the Cuban Revolution during the 1960s, limitations in our ability to understand the past become apparent. One limitation is the dominance of stereotypical depictions of the early revolutionary period. Typically, they derive from the North American right<sup>1</sup> or from disillusioned Cubans who have concentrated on the repressive nature of the regime's attitude towards intellectual endeavour.<sup>2</sup> Another limitation is apparent in accounts of intellectual exchanges between Cuban and western thinkers or academics during the twentieth century. References to the 'fellow traveller' or 'revolutionary tourist' phenomenon have drawn upon the study of western intellectuals' pilgrimages to idealised societies such as the Soviet Union, China or Cuba.<sup>3</sup> These studies assume an unproblematic vision of revolutionary Cuba, often dubbing the Revolution 'ideology free' or 'without a blueprint' in the early 1960s, only to argue later that it had later been betrayed and become Stalinist.<sup>4</sup> In

many of these readings, Cuban intellectuals are inevitably seen as the victims of political oppression and denied any collective agency.

And yet, if there is one truth about intellectuals, it is that they seek to define the contours of intellectual activity and their collective identity as a group.<sup>5</sup> The notion of the intellectual is said to have originated in late nineteenth century France with regard to Emile Zola's participation as a writer and social commentator in the public and political debate that became known as the Dreyfus Affair. Since then, left-wing public intellectuals have sought to define themselves as committed to notions of progressive and, in their opinion, universally-held values, while being independent of political institutions.<sup>6</sup> In 1960s Cuba, the intellectual class – understood in these terms – was dominated by writers, journalists and academics. Accordingly, this article explores the ways in which individuals defined themselves and each other as intellectuals in ways that fitted

with Cuba's revolutionary processes of change and gave them public status and recognition. As a methodological approach, oral history has been used as a process of democratising our understanding of important events and periods of history by giving voice to groups of people otherwise ignored by mainstream accounts. Beyond the everyday and oral histories from below, oral histories of more elite social groups, including intellectuals, have also contributed to our understanding of the past.<sup>7</sup> Arguably however, such oral histories may provide understandings that are as limited as other kinds of historical record.<sup>8</sup>

This article explores these issues in relation to studying the figure and role of intellectuals within the context of the Cuban Revolution. The use of oral history approaches with Cuban intellectuals uncovers a social elite whose members are acutely aware of the need to define themselves as intellectuals within limits imposed by political practice. The politically defined limits to action by Cuba's intellectuals or *intelligentsia* suggest that both time and space have implications for remembering and for what can be legitimately remembered. A related issue concerns how to reconcile historical memory with these politically defined spaces for action and suggests that the art of self-presentation – particularly important for the intellectual – requires constant monitoring of the spaces available and the limits permissible to such endeavour.<sup>9</sup> By 'spaces', I mean the physical outlets for intellectual expression; that is to say, the publications available to intellectuals. In addition, I use the term spaces to suggest that the content of intellectual expression is also politically shaped.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu offers a theoretical framework through which to read oral history material relevant to this discussion. A distinction is made between Bourdieu's use of the terms 'field' and 'habitus', so that they may be applied to this exploration of Cuban intellectual activity. Bourdieu's use of what he refers to as the 'field of production' and the 'field of reception' is relevant to these oral accounts too, in that the process of self-presentation is seen to be ongoing and not simply fixed in time. Arguably, a theoretically informed reading of these Cuban interviews provides a means for understanding the dynamic processes through which intellectuals seek to shape personal meaning about their lives and express their collective identity as a social group.

I am a Spanish academic based in the UK who, in the 2000s, collected twenty-two oral history interviews with self-identifying Cuban intellectuals then resident both in Cuba and in the UK. In the 1960s, these intellectuals had been members of editorial committees and published in journals that made them representative of what I have referred to as a progressive Cuban New Left, because of the antagonism they displayed towards established Communist Parties and Stalinist practices.<sup>10</sup> All interviews except two took place in Cuba and were arranged through a process of snowballing and with the help of gatekeepers. Interviews lasted anything between

one and four hours, and although most were one-off interviews, multiple encounters and interviews were possible with three of the participants. Interviews sought to explore the changing spaces for action available to Cuba's intellectuals during the 1960s, as well as the ways in which they have reflected upon their roles more than three decades later.

What follows provides a historical context of Cuba in the 1960s, outlining the formation of distinctive intellectual elites around two main journals, *Lunes de Revolución* and *Pensamiento Crítico*. This section is followed by an exploration of difficulties associated with analysing interviews conducted in the 2000s about events and debates that occurred during the 1960s. The final section returns to consider how Bourdieu's conceptual framework may help us make sense of oral histories collected in highly politicised contexts.

### The birth and death of a Cuban New Left

This article stems from a study of the intellectual cross-fertilisation between the European New Left and the Cuban Revolution. Both phenomena emerged from the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s and shared a mistrust of Marxist orthodoxies represented by the values and practices dominant in Communist Parties across the world. The New Left and the Cuban Revolution were soon attracted to each other, and established a dialogue and relationship during the 1960s. Part of this attraction was driven by the special relationship that developed between the state and the intellectual elite in Cuba, signalled by the creation of new intellectual spaces inside the Revolution in the form of publications such as *Lunes de Revolución* or *Pensamiento Crítico*. It was around these outlets that a new intellectual Cuban class was promoted and exchanges with their peers in Western Europe took place. On occasions, the editorial teams from these publications would be instrumental in the organisation of events – such as the 1969 Cultural Congress – or personal visits by western intellectuals such as Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. They were also instrumental in bringing to Cuba representatives of the emerging European New Left, including Stuart Hall, Robin Blackburn, Bernard Kouchner, Régis Debray and Jeannette Habel.<sup>11</sup> Writing about that period in 2000, the first editor of *Pensamiento Crítico*, Jesús Díaz, recalled:

Very soon we established correspondence and exchanges with our counterparts, the New Left journals of other latitudes: *Cuadernos de Ruedo Ibérico*, in the Spanish diaspora; *Pasado y Presente*, in Buenos Aires; *Quaderni Rossi* and *Cuaderni Piacentini*, in Italy; *Partisans*, in Paris; *New Left Review*, in London, and *Monthly Review*, in the United States, among others. Friends like Perry Anderson, Robin Blackburn, Javier Pradera, François Maspero, Paul M Sweezy, KS Karol, Fernando Enrique Cardoso, Laura González, Rossana Rossanda, Saverio Tutino and many others considered us their interlocutors. They all came to our office when they visited Cuba.<sup>12</sup>



There was a strong affinity between *Pensamiento Crítico* and the US New Left. Photo: Kepa Artaraz, University of Brighton.

These publications take us through a journey of early attraction between Cuban and European intellectuals and an interest in common ideas. They also provide a clear insight into the changing nature of the positions, roles and dilemmas of the intellectual in the Cuban Revolution in the context of changing political spaces for intellectual action. One such publication that is symptomatic of the genuine intellectual excitement with which the new revolutionary government was received in Cuba was the cultural supplement of the 26 July Movement's (MR26)<sup>13</sup> newspaper, *Lunes de Revolución*. There, a generation of Cuban intellectuals who had opted for exile in the 1950s returned to Cuba to fulfil a new role of political and intellectual engagement. From this publication, they were able to explore contemporary intellectual trends as well as develop an anti-imperialist stance that shared political positions with the progressive French New Left press of the time.<sup>14</sup> These publications on both sides of the Atlantic were keen to explore and support decolonisation processes around the world which, like the Algerian War, became key to the formative process of the French New Left.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of bringing together a new intellectual class in support of the revolutionary process, *Lunes de Revolución* (hereafter *Lunes*) soon closed its doors. The publication was the victim of a power struggle taking place inside the leadership between members of MR26 and the Popular Socialist Party (PSP), Cuba's pre-revolutionary Communist Party. The latter was Stalinist in outlook and wanted intellectual activity to operate in a more institutionalised manner.<sup>16</sup> This divide was succinctly outlined by Antón Arrufat, who writes:

The PSP people wanted to control culture, especially Edith García Buchaca, as they considered themselves the most capable of running culture in a socialist country. Edith was the instigator of the closure of *Lunes*, taking culture in her hands, and dictating how to write and what to write, how to paint and what to paint... and that is where the problems started.<sup>17</sup>

The creation of the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC) in 1961 represented a new form of collaboration between the state and the intellectual through an official institutional form that resembled East European practice. Thus, during the celebration of the first National Congress of Culture that year, a speech by Fidel Castro entitled 'Words to Intellectuals' appealed for their co-operation inside the Revolution, although it left the decision as to who was positioned 'in' or 'against' the revolution firmly in political hands.<sup>18</sup> These events signalled that the space for action available to Cuban intellectuals would change throughout the decade in accordance with political priorities and would lead to drastic changes in policy.

The closure of *Lunes* represented a transformation in relations between Cuba's intellectual elite and the island's political leaders. The initial enthusiastic welcome received by intellectuals was now dependent on their willingness to operate within politically determined limits. This change mirrored the wider political radicalisation of the Revolution following the deterioration of relations between Cuba and the US after the imposition of the economic embargo, the attempted Bay of Pigs Invasion and the Missile Crisis of 1962. Slowly, the New Left Cuban intellectual became steeped in Marxist traditions and in academic perspec-



Cover of *Pensamiento Crítico* (February 1969) showing fragments of anti-police posters produced by the French student movement. Photo: Kepa Artaraz, University of Brighton.

tives that favoured philosophy and history rather than literature or journalism. The key institutional setting of this new generation of intellectuals called on to think the Revolution was the University of Havana. For American sociologist C Wright Mills, writing on the Cuban Revolution:

Here were a few middle-class students and intellectuals in contact with the tragedy of Cuban poverty and corruption, responding to it in a very revolutionary way [...] we are, a new left in the world. A left that has never suffered from all that Stalinism has meant to the old left.<sup>19</sup>

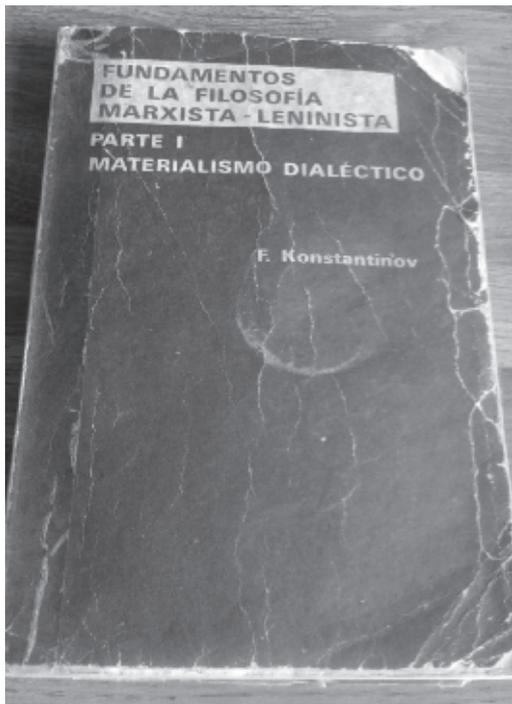
As Arnaldo Silva, former director of the Schools of Revolutionary Instruction argued, the Revolution chose the next generation of intellectuals from amongst the brightest and most able students of the university.<sup>20</sup> They constituted a small, educated elite picked from the University of Havana's student body on the basis of what Armando Chávez, a former member of the original Department of Philosophy referred to as their 'revolutionary disposition and academic ability.'<sup>21</sup> Their role as part of the intellectual vanguard would be to extend the teaching of revolutionary ideology, including the study of Marxism and Cuban history at Cuban higher education institutions. From this institutional platform, they were given free rein over curriculum design. It is instructive to note that, as soon as possible, this group dropped the training they had received in the Soviet, dialectical materialist (DIAMAT) interpretation of Marxism that intellectuals like Chávez considered akin to 'religious doctrine.' Instead, their new courses on Marxist thought included the study of Marxism in its

historical context, including contemporary Western Marxist thinkers, and what were then known as Third World works on development/underdevelopment by Gunder Frank or Frantz Fanon.<sup>22</sup> This intellectual pursuit sought the production of a Marxist interpretation of the Cuban Revolution, and with it, a better understanding of the legitimate role that intellectuals could play in that process.<sup>23</sup> For Eduardo Torres Cuevas, former director of the prestigious Fernando Ortiz Research Centre:

We had just completed a Revolution and we were looking for a theoretical understanding of it. Here Althusser's concept of 'theoretical practice' was very useful because it suggested that praxis leads to the questioning and eventual rewriting of theory. In reality, we were looking for the theoretical foundations of the Revolution. Of course, there were those in the Cuban Revolution who had it all resolved and answered in their Soviet manuals.<sup>24</sup>

At the university, members of this Cuban New Left launched the journal *Pensamiento Crítico*. Incorporating thematic interests similar to those of *New Left Review* in the UK or *Monthly Review Press* in the US, the journal and its editorial team enjoyed hegemonic status in Cuba between 1967 and 1971. For Juan Valdés Paz, a young student at the time, *Pensamiento Crítico*'s New Left outlook was cemented by the creation of the Latin American Solidarity Organisation (OLAS) in 1967 as well as the Cultural Congress and the first conference of the Continental Organisation of Latin American Students (OCLAE) in 1968.<sup>25</sup>

The change in the country's political mood that



Translated Soviet texts were initially used to teach dialectic materialism in Cuban universities. Photo: Kepa Artaraz, University of Brighton.

would eventually lead to the marginalisation of the *Pensamiento Crítico* group and to the breakup of relations with Western intellectuals began in 1968. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia that year was widely criticised in European intellectual circles, but received the support of Cuba's government.<sup>26</sup> It would become a presage of the narrowing of spaces for intellectual practice. A key moment in this process came with the Padilla Affair, the case of a young poet who was arrested and publicly forced to retract his alleged anti-revolutionary views. In the event, the formal breakup of relations took place during the 1971 Cultural Congress when the official declaration referred to Western intellectuals as 'a mafia of pseudo-leftist bourgeois intellectuals.'<sup>27</sup> These events had clear consequences for the availability of spaces for critical thinking inside the Revolution and signalled the beginning of a new period that has been described by Aurelio Alonso, a former member of the editorial team in *Pensamiento Crítico*, in an article written some twenty years later:

With the entry of Cuba in the East European Economic Bloc in 1972 began what Cuban intellectuals refer to as the *Quinquenio gris* [the 1971-1976 grey years, a period of severe censorship and repression, also known as the Stalinist years] and the effective cancellation of every space for polemical debate in the terrain of ideas.<sup>28</sup>

## Conducting oral history with intellectuals in the Cuban context

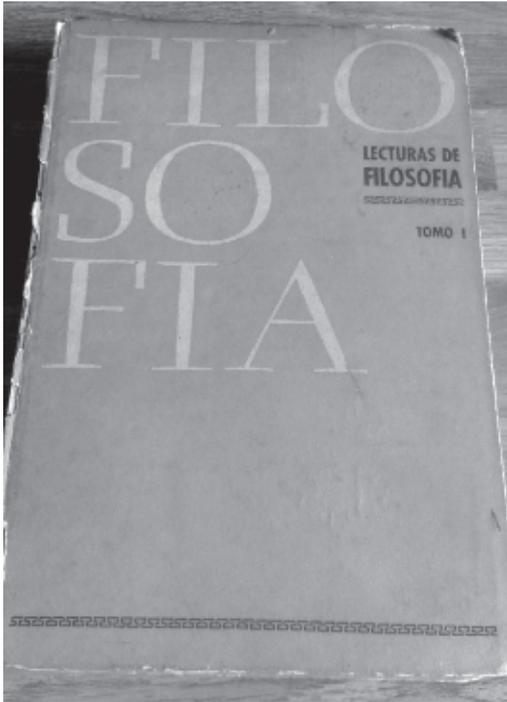
The preceding historical outline provides a background to the political processes against which to set the changing debates on the Cuban intellectual's role within the Revolution. The journals introduced above – *Lunes* and *Pensamiento Crítico* – represent the institutional backbone of successive intellectual generations in the Cuban Revolution who were able, for a time, to reconcile their commitment to the revolutionary process with their identity. They left a body of knowledge and production in these 1960s institutional milestones that represents a primary historical source of data which tells us much about how intellectuals were redefined during this period.<sup>29</sup> In addition, twenty-two oral history interviews gathered in the 2000s sought to explore the dominant debates about the role of the intellectual that permeated their own activity in the 1960s. What follows is an exploration of how oral histories may inform the ways in which collective identities are constructed and renegotiated along the boundaries of what is politically possible.<sup>30</sup>

A wide literature has acknowledged the importance of the intellectual in the maintenance of narratives about Cuba's revolutionary process.<sup>31</sup> However, collecting oral histories with Cuban intellectuals about their role in the revolution – aligned with the political power, but aware of the need to define themselves within the limits imposed by politics – brought about two interconnected issues during my study. One refers to the politically defined limits to action by members of this Cuban elite. The second is a methodological issue that attempts to reconcile historical memory with these politically defined spaces for action.

## 'When', 'where' and 'who' predefine and shape the subject matter

The early days of the Cuban Revolution inspire a strong sense of 'myth-making' that is critical to the legitimacy of the status quo.<sup>32</sup> This means that what can legitimately be explored and discussed about intellectuals evolves and changes in different periods of Cuban revolutionary history. Similarly, what can be discussed from inside or outside Cuba are different things, as is the nature of the debate that is considered legitimate by different actors.

In relation to 'when', the evolution of debates regarding the role of the intellectual shows changes in the scope for presenting what are regarded as legitimate positions. For example, Cuba's 1960s challenge to Soviet orthodoxy included representations of the intellectual popular in Western Europe that were severely restrained during the years of greater Soviet influence on the island in the 1970s. Similarly, the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s and its subsequent loss of influence in Cuba led to fresh intellectual search for original ways in which the story of the revolutionary process could adapt to the island's rapidly changing geopolitical context.<sup>33</sup> Throughout the Revolution, Cuba's leadership has exercised different degrees of



The Philosophy Department at the University of Havana produced an alternative collection of readings in Marxism that challenged Soviet orthodoxy. Photo: Kepa Artaraz, University of Brighton.

pressure on intellectuals, either encouraging them to be bold about exploring the revolutionary process or, alternatively, to stop all unwelcome activity. Both the late 1960s and the 1990s represented an intellectual spring. However, both periods ended in what Cuban academics and intellectuals refer to as ‘slap downs’ by the leadership, represented by the closure of *Pensamiento Crítico* in 1971 and by the CEA (Centre for American Studies) Affair in 1996 that also saw the sudden closure of this think-tank.<sup>34</sup>

At the time of interviewing for this study, the closure of the CEA was recent and had affected a number of intellectuals who had shared the aims and aspirations of the *Pensamiento Crítico* generation. Indeed, Aurelio Alonso, a former member of the editorial team at *Pensamiento Crítico*, recalled that he had to suffer the same fate twice more than two decades apart, seeing institutions closed and their working groups disbanded.<sup>35</sup> The effect of the institutional and academic department closures might have been officially explained in terms of administrative imperatives, although the wider intellectual community was clear about the political reasons for these actions. In terms of what this meant for the collection of oral histories about the role of intellectuals in the 1960s, these events had a chilling effect best exemplified by the requirement to have access to a gatekeeper to introduce researchers, seek permission to conduct oral histories, and establish the credentials of the researcher in question before trust

could be established. So clearly ‘when’ is critical to the collection of oral histories in Cuba.

From my experience, not all Cuban intellectuals at that time agreed with the idea that the CEA Affair represented a climate of censorship that brought to an end the ‘intellectual spring’ of the early 1990s.<sup>36</sup> In an interview published shortly after the CEA closure, Juan Antonio Blanco made a distinction between dissent within the system and anti-systemic dissenters and used his personal experience as a member of the *Pensamiento Crítico* generation to explain how his own internal dissent in Cuba was dealt with at the time:

In the late 1960s I was teaching in the department of philosophy at the university. The department was a centre for all kinds of creative thinking about socialism, and we published a magazine called *Pensamiento Crítico* [...] This experiment lasted until the end of the decade, when the Russification of the Cuban model began [...] All of a sudden the direction of the department changed, a new curriculum was imposed, and *Pensamiento Crítico* was shut down.<sup>37</sup>

*Did anything else happen to you?*

No, I did not end up in prison or anything like that, and I was able to get a job elsewhere, but during that time there was little room for public debate on issues like this. Amazingly enough there is more room for debate today.

Beyond ‘when’ oral histories are conducted, ‘where’ the issue of intellectuals is discussed (inside or outside Cuba) and ‘who’ conducts them are clearly connected. The history of the Cuban Revolution is full of notable cases of intellectuals who have at various points sought exile and a new life outside the island, including Carlos Franqui, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Heberto Padilla and even Jesús Díaz, the first editor of *Pensamiento Crítico*. Writing from exile, accounts about the spaces available for intellectual activity in Cuba become diatribes on the incompatibility between the Revolution and freedom of speech that present a simple worldview of binary divisions (inside Cuba bad, outside Cuba good). Debates from within the island constitute a mirror image. Depicted as ‘anti-systemic’ forms of dissent, the contribution of exiled Cuban intellectuals to key debates is completely ignored inside the island. So ‘where’ clearly is key to the debate.

Not all outsiders, however, are dismissed out of hand. ‘Who’ explores the role of the intellectual is of extreme importance to the position that can be presented. At a personal level, being defined as a trustworthy academic researcher – but crucially, an outsider – seemed to present definitive advantages at the time of this study. Access to research subjects was possible thanks to Cuban intellectuals willing to trust me and provide introductions to other participants. However, what conducting oral histories with representatives of the Cuban 1960s New Left had not prepared me for



A selection of *Pensamiento Crítico* issues. Photo: Kepa Artaraz, University of Brighton.

were the repeated expressions of personal thanks by participants. These were thanks for taking an interest in an issue that defined their lives and for tackling a period of history that I was deemed to be better positioned to explore as an outsider. The significance of this vote of confidence on a foreign researcher cannot be underestimated when considering the political reprimand, leading to the closure of the CEA, suffered by Cuban intellectuals shortly before my fieldwork began. This closure also had a chilling effect on the possibilities for discussion of a controversial period of recent history (the 1960s) and the role of a group of intellectuals who had similarly been deemed to have overstepped the mark.

In discussions of oral history in highly politicised research settings, it has been argued that participants often perceive foreign researchers as able to confer legitimacy to the study of their lives.<sup>38</sup> In the case of intellectuals as participants, it could be argued that the vote of thanks I received from them belied the importance they attributed to what Bourdieu would call the field of production.<sup>39</sup> That is to say, these intellectuals understood the way in which a foreign researcher could better echo a topic regarded as politically sensitive in Cuba. After all, intellectuals are very interested in reflecting on narratives designed to present and define a collective identity. It is to this art of collective self-presentation that attention now turns.

### The art of collective self-presentation

The oral histories gathered for this study sought to establish how the concept of the Cuban intellectual had changed during the 1960s. Protagonists of events

described earlier were asked about decisive actions during the decade, their own role and the evolving debates about the role of intellectuals through that period. The trajectory of these debates can be summarised in two halves.

Early on, members of Cuba's intellectual elite claimed their status on the basis of a commitment to the rapidly radicalising political process. Novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante and members of the editorial team at *Lunes* represented this position. They saw themselves as the young intellectual ambassadors of a revolution that demanded 'a new closeness to the political, social and economic aspects of society'.<sup>40</sup> Implicit in this statement was a critique of an older generation of bourgeois intellectuals such as Cintio Vitier, Virgilio Piñera and José Lezama Lima, whose literary and artistic practice seemed detached from these realities. Ironically, it would be Cabrera Infante and others claiming this space within the Revolution, such as Carlos Franqui, who would eventually leave the island and become the exiled voice of Cuban intellectuals, a point not missed by those left behind. Rolando Rodríguez, an early director of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Havana, recalled:

In 1961 we had the debate about being an intellectual in *Lunes de Revolución*. The group of Cabrera Infante wanted to squash the catholic group of Cintio Vitier and others. In the end, 'Guillermito' and his friends all left the country.<sup>41</sup>

The key point to make is that, once in exile, intellectuals like Cabrera Infante have wanted to create an

image of authoritarian censorship in the island that affects all intellectuals alike.<sup>42</sup> This is a position that does not sustain itself by events – notwithstanding the levels of ostracism they suffered in the 1970s, Vitier, Lezama Lima and Piñera all stayed on the island – and constitutes an attempt at collective self-presentation. The Revolution, of course, engaged in a similar process of presentation and image management: its rhetoric referred to Vitier and others who stayed in Cuba as *intelectuales honrados* (honest intellectuals).<sup>43</sup>

The second half of the 1960s dominated by the *Pensamiento Crítico* group saw a transition to creating a new intellectual figure that described itself entirely in Marxist language. Having left behind the categories of traditional, bourgeois or disengaged but honest intellectuals, the *Pensamiento Crítico* group sought to reconcile intellectual work and revolutionary commitment. It did so by resorting to the Althusserian-Leninist description of the intellectual as part of the vanguard whose role in the party is to produce the correct theory of the Revolution.<sup>44</sup> Referring to the Althusserian relationship between theory and practice, Fernando Martínez and others sought to claim their status as intellectuals by suggesting that thinking the Revolution was itself a practice: 'linking theory to practice is only possible if theory has practical objectives and if at the same time making theory is recognised as a practice in its own right.'<sup>45</sup>

Not everybody appropriated the Leninist model of the intellectual in the same guise. Indeed, Lisandro Otero and Jorge Serguera, writing in 1968 for *Revolución y Cultura*, suggested that the complete fusion of theory and practice (intellectual work and guerrilla activity) in the figures of Che Guevara and French intellectual Régis Debray<sup>46</sup> better represented the ideal intellectual figure.<sup>47</sup> This understanding of the intellectual openly criticised the model represented by the *Pensamiento Crítico* group and by many members of *Revolución y Cultura* who promptly resigned from the editorial team. However, this view of the revolutionary intellectual was reinforced by the Cultural Congress of 1968.<sup>48</sup> It led to a cult of guerrilla action, marginalising anyone claiming to have a legitimate role as an intellectual but unwilling to spread the revolution through armed means.<sup>49</sup>

Yet, on exploring these issues, there is a real dissonance between the written evidence from the 1960s and the positions identified during the 2000s via oral history interviews. Reflecting on the 1960s, we are told by Jorge Serguera, a former editor of *Revolución y Cultura* (1967-1971): 'Debray? I personally never really liked him. He came to Cuba pretending to be able to tell us how to carry out a revolution. What does he know about revolution?'<sup>50</sup> This is in spite of the fact that, as outlined above, *Revolución y Cultura* (edited by Serguera) regarded Debray as a hero and representative, along with Guevara, of the ideal living example of a revolutionary intellectual.

Not every inconsistency can be explained by the limits of historical memory. When oral history openly

contradicts the written articles of the 1960s, we need to explore alternative explanations. Debray's subsequent distancing from Cuba – as was the case with Cabrera Infante or Franqui – has to remain a crucial reason for current attempts to besmirch his character or contribution to the history of the revolutionary process. As Rolando Rodríguez observed:

Debray probably had the most lucid vision of the role of the guerrilla war. Later on, he decided to turn to the right and distance himself from the revolution which is a real shame.<sup>51</sup>

The inconsistencies highlighted between intellectual written output in the 1960s and oral histories in the 2000s raise an important methodological question. If the oral history interview is undermined by situated codes of meaning, how can we read the data collected by means of those oral histories? If recently collected oral histories present views of the 1960s that are both personal and edited to suit the limits of possibility at the time of speaking, how can we reliably understand the processes at play? These questions raise issues about reliability, the limits of memory and the role of oral history in the creation of collective identities.<sup>52</sup> These questions are particularly important when making use of oral histories in highly politicised environments such as Cuba. The next section suggests ways in which Bourdieu can support our exploration of some of these methodological issues in oral history.

### **When actors are the authors: intellectuals and their historical memory**

Bourdieu's theoretical, conceptual and methodological contributions constitute a useful set of tools to explore the intellectual's role in different contexts.<sup>53</sup> They can also help alleviate some of the difficulties in making sense of oral history material outlined above. Bourdieu's notion of a 'field' as a system of objective relations of power and struggle for position is one such key concept. Together with the habitus, or 'the basic stock of knowledge that people carry out as a result of living in particular cultures or subcultures',<sup>54</sup> Bourdieu's terms identify how, as positions within the intellectual field change, so do the dispositions of the protagonists; the habitus thus becomes a form of mediation between the objective conditions and the realm of practice. Moreover, the habitus is constantly created through the conjunction of objective structures and the individual's personal history.<sup>55</sup>

For Bourdieu, habitus links to the concept of capital, in that the habitus characteristic of the dominant layers (or elite groups) within society (for example, intellectuals) tends to multiply the value of their various forms of capital and eventually become a type of capital in their own right (known as symbolic capital).<sup>56</sup> This is particularly relevant to intellectuals who do not necessarily possess economic capital, but who are invested with the authority and legitimacy necessary to produce overall judgements on the state of affairs of society.

Bourdieu further argues that this power extends to how intellectuals are able to present themselves to society.

With regards to the circulation of ideas – in this case, debates about the role of the intellectual – Bourdieu’s contribution lies in arguing for the inclusion of an understanding of the field of production with the ‘travelling texts’ which ‘are often reinterpreted in accordance with the structure of the field of reception’.<sup>57</sup> This statement is particularly significant in the present context as it may help us understand the ways in which recent oral histories are used by intellectuals to redefine accounts of past events. Furthermore, we may understand the dynamics of being part of Cuba’s intellectual elite during the revolutionary period in ways that fit with Bourdieu’s field of reception and the time when oral histories were being collected. Intellectual status also exercises symbolic power, so that intellectual elites may play a role in the shaping of dominant discourses about their own position, role and significance in society. This is of particular importance in the Cuban context, where spaces for intellectual practice have periodically been subject to political pressures. A theoretically informed reading of oral history material offers a context for meanings that change over time.

## NOTES

1. See for example Theodore Draper, *Castroism: Theory and Practice*, New York: Praeger, 1965.
2. See for example Carlos Franqui, *Family Portrait with Fidel*, New York: Vintage Books, 1985; and Guillermo Cabrera Infante, *Mea Cuba*, London: Faber and Faber, 1994.
3. For example, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, ‘Tourists of the Revolution,’ in Hans Magnus Enzensberger (ed), *Dreamers of the Absolute*, London: Radius, 1988, pp 224-252; David Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers: Intellectual Friends of Communism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988; Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China and Cuba 1928-1978*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981; and Jeanine Verdes-Leroux, *La Lune et le Caudillo: Le rêve des intellectuels et le régime cubain (1959-1971)*, Paris: Gallimard, 1981.
4. See for example Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sartre on Cuba*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1961; and Maurice Zeitlin, ‘Cuba: revolution without a blueprint’, in Irving L Horowitz (ed), *Cuban Communism*, New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1970, pp 199-210.
5. Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988.
6. See Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, London: Vintage, 1994.
7. Some have made use of academics

- as the sources of primary data; see Ronald E Doel, ‘Oral history of American science: a forty year review,’ *History of Science*, vol 41, no 4, 2003, pp 349-378.
8. Alessandro Portelli, ‘The peculiarities of oral history’, *History Workshop Journal*, vol 12, no 1, 1981, pp 96-107.
  9. Alexander Freund, ‘Under storytelling’s spell? Oral history in a neoliberal age,’ *The Oral History Review*, vol 42, no 1, 2015, pp 96-132.
  10. Kepa Artaraz, *Cuba and Western Intellectuals Since 1959*, New York: Palgrave, 2009.
  11. Jaime Sarusky, ‘Sartre en Cuba,’ *Revolución y Cultura*, no 5, 1997, pp 12-17.
  12. Jesús Díaz, ‘Cuba: El fin de una ilusión. La quiebra de “El Caimán Barbudo” y la clausura de Pensamiento Crítico,’ *Claves de Razón Práctica*, no 104, 2000, p 68. All translations are by the author.
  13. The 26 July Movement was the name taken by Castro’s guerrilla forces during the revolutionary war against the dictatorship led by Fulgencio Batista.
  14. This applied in particular to publications including *Les Temps Modernes* or *L’Observateur*.
  15. Alejandro Mesa, ‘La crítica literaria en *Lunes de Revolución*’, *Anuario de Literatura y Lingüística*, no 16, 1985, pp 190-196.
  16. Ostensibly the issue that led to the closure of the magazine was the participation of editorial team members

## Conclusion

The subordination of intellectual freedom to political power is not unique to communist regimes. What is unique is the difficulty to make nuanced assessments beyond the easy binary categorisations contained in the terms ‘oppression/freedom’. In this study of an intellectual elite through oral histories, similar traps apply because intellectuals in the Cuban tradition have a particular interest in the process of collective self-presentation as a distinctive group with varying, but relatively high, levels of power to express themselves. In the Cuban intellectual field, however, they always have to take into consideration the amount of space that the political leadership makes available to them. Thus, any search for understanding of the role of Cuba’s intellectual elite during the 1960s requires that we are aware of the ways in which collective self-presentation is always made in relation to what Bourdieu would refer to as the field of reception. From this theoretically framed analysis of oral history interpretation within Cuba, it is clear that different processes shape the extent to which intellectual elites of thinkers, academics and writers may constitute reliable witnesses to history.

- in the making of PM, a film that depicted Havana’s night life in a ‘negative’ way. These events have been explored in detail by Nicola Miller, ‘The intellectual in the Cuban Revolution,’ in Alistair Hennessy (ed), *Intellectuals in the 20th Century Caribbean: Vol II: Unity in Variety – The Hispanic and Francophone Caribbean*, Basingstoke and London: Warwick University Caribbean Studies, MacMillan, pp 83-98.
17. Irina Rosquette Pulido, ‘Orbita de Lunes: Aproximaciones para un estudio del magazine *Lunes de Revolución* (1959-1961),’ Facultad de Comunicación Social: Universidad de la Habana, 1992, p 49.
  18. Fidel Castro, ‘Paroles aux intellectuels,’ *Partisans*, no 2, 1961, pp 171-174; and Artaraz, 2009.
  19. C Wright Mills, *Castro’s Cuba: The Revolution in Cuba*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1960, p 43.
  20. Interview with Arnaldo Silva, former director of the Schools of Revolutionary Instruction and member of the Department of Philosophy, University of Havana (1967-1971); recorded by Kepa Artaraz, 13 May 1999.
  21. Interview with Armando Chávez, member of the original Department of Philosophy, University of Havana; recorded by Kepa Artaraz, 12 December 1998.
  22. Departamento de Filosofía, *Lecturas de Filosofía: Vols I and II*, Havana: Instituto del Libro, 1968.
  23. Interview with Fernando Martínez,

- former director of *Pensamiento Crítico* and the Department of Philosophy, University of Havana (1967-1971); recorded by Kepa Artaraz, 7 May 1999.
- 24.** Interview with Eduardo Torres Cuevas, director of Casa de Altos Estudios Fernando Ortiz; recorded by Kepa Artaraz, 12 May 1999.
- 25.** Interview with Juan Valdés Paz, participant at the 1968 Cultural Congress; recorded by Kepa Artaraz, 17 May 1999.
- 26.** KS Karol, *Guerrillas in Power: The Course of the Cuban Revolution*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1971.
- 27.** Verde Olivo, 'Declaración del Primer Congreso de Cultura,' *Verde Olivo*, no 19, 1971, pp 3-7, 51-66.
- 28.** *Quinquenio gris* (the grey years) refers to a five-year period up to the mid-1970s when intellectual and artistic activity in the island was highly censored. Aurelio Alonso, 'Marxismo y espacio de debate en la Revolución Cubana,' *Temas*, no 3, 1995, pp 34-43.
- 29.** Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'A chronology of the New Left and its successors or: who is old-fashioned now?,' in Leo Panitch (ed), *Why not Capitalism?: The Socialist Register*, London: Merlin Press, 1995, pp, 22-49, p24. The analysis of journals in the study of the political and ideological directions of editorial teams and/or intellectual groups is well established in the literature. In the case of Cuban periodicals, it has been used by Nouredine Rochdi, 'Vingt ans de politique culturelle de la revue cubaine Casa de las Américas (1960-1980),' PhD thesis, La Sorbonne, Paris, 1991; Jorge Fomet and Luisa Campuzano, *La revista Casa de las Américas: un proyecto continental*, Havana: Centro de Investigación de la Cultura Cubana Juan Marinello, 2001; and Artaraz, 2009.
- 30.** Freund, 2015.
- 31.** See Antoni Kapcia, *Cuba: Island of Dreams*, Oxford and New York: Berg, 2000; Hennessy, 1992; and Ambrosio Fomet, 'El intelectual en la revolución,' in Mario Benedetti (ed), *Literatura y arte nuevo en Cuba*, Barcelona: Editorial Estela, 1971, pp 33-37.
- 32.** Kapcia, 2000; and Antoni Kapcia, 'Revolution, the intellectual and a Cuban identity: the long tradition,' *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol 1, no 2, 1982, pp 63-78.
- 33.** Medea Benjamin, Cuba, *Talking about Revolution: Interviews with Juan Antonio Blanco*, Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1997.
- 34.** Maurizio Giuliano, *El caso CEA: Intelectuales e inquisidores en Cuba*, Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1998.
- 35.** Interview with Aurelio Alonso, former member of the Department of Philosophy, University of Havana and *Pensamiento Crítico* (1967-1971). Recorded by Kepa Artaraz, 26 May 1999.
- 36.** Bert Hoffmann, 'Kuba: die reform von innen, die nicht stattfand: die renaissance der Kubanischen sozialwissenschaften und die reaktion der staatsführung-eine sichtung neuerer publikationen aus Kuba,' *PROKLA*, vol 27, no 2, 1997, pp 317-333.
- 37.** Benjamin, 1997, p 56.
- 38.** Erin Jessee, 'The limits of oral history: ethics and methodology amid highly politicised research settings,' *The Oral History Review*, vol 38, no 2, 2011, pp 287-307.
- 39.** Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993.
- 40.** Editorial, *Lunes de Revolución*, 23 March 1959, p 2.
- 41.** Interview with Rolando Rodríguez, former director of the Department of Philosophy, University of Havana (1967) and director of the Instituto del Libro (1967-1980). Recorded by Kepa Artaraz, 25 May 1999.
- 42.** Alfred MacAdam, 'Guillermo Cabrera Infante: the art of fiction,' *The Paris Review*, no 87, 1983. Accessed online at [www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3079/guillermo-cabrera-infante-the-art-of-fiction-no-75-guillermo-cabrera-infante](http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3079/guillermo-cabrera-infante-the-art-of-fiction-no-75-guillermo-cabrera-infante), 12 November 2016.
- 43.** José Antonio Portuondo, 'Los intelectuales y la revolución,' *Cuba Socialista*, no 34, 1964, pp 51-64.
- 44.** Interview with Jose Bell Lara, former member of *Pensamiento Crítico* and the Department of Philosophy, University of Havana (1967-1971). Recorded by Kepa Artaraz, 4, 16 May and 2 June 1999.
- 45.** Fernando Martínez Heredia, 'El ejercicio de pensar,' *El Caimán Barbudo*, no 11, 1967, pp 2-5.
- 46.** Régis Debray became celebrated in Cuba for his theorisation of Cuba's revolution in Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America*, Paris: Maspero, 1967. He joined Guevara's guerrilla efforts in Bolivia but was arrested. He eventually distanced himself from Cuba.
- 47.** Interview with Jorge Serguera, former ambassador to Algeria (1962-1965) and editor of *Revolución y Cultura* (1967-1971). Recorded by Kepa Artaraz, 20 May 1999.
- 48.** Lisandro Otero, 'El tiempo de Revolución y Cultura,' *Revolución y Cultura*, no 11, 1986, pp 7-8.
- 49.** Interview with Manuel Quintana, sub-editor of *Juventud Rebelde* and leader of Juventudes Socialistas, 1968, and member of organising committee for the *Campamento 5 de Mayo*, summer 1968; recorded by Kepa Artaraz, 16 May 2000.
- 50.** See note 48.
- 51.** See note 42.
- 52.** See Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, third edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000; Julie Stephens, 'Our remembered selves: oral history and feminist memory,' *Oral History*, vol 38, no 1, 2010, pp 81-90; and Jessee, 2011.
- 53.** Jeremy Jennings (ed), *Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century France: Mandarins and Samurais*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1993.
- 54.** Derek Layder, *Understanding Social Theory*, London: Sage, 1994, p 143.
- 55.** Bourdieu, 1993.
- 56.** Pierre Bourdieu, 'The social conditions of the international circulation of ideas,' in Richard Shusterman (ed), *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, pp 220-228.
- 57.** Bourdieu, 1999, p 221.

Address for correspondence:  
K.Artaraz@brighton.ac.uk