

Jesús Zúñiga

The Word in Cuba: Between Totalitarianism and its Thirst for Freedom

Havana – One of the most interesting polemics about the origin of language divides linguists into two schools of thought: those who think the ability to speak is innate to man, which has given rise to many unconnected languages, and those who believe in a common good won after a long evolutionary process, which has generated a unique language from which are derived all of humanity's languages.

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If the latter hypothesis is correct, Spanish would just be another stream of that remote mother tongue of which we're all tributaries; a language maintained alive by an uninterrupted effort of thousands of successive generations. This academic dispute will probably never be categorically resolved.

With the acquisition of the spoken word, we started to exercise our right to freedom. We learned to be free in the choice of the indicated vocabulary to express our »I,« our personal will, our state of spirit in any given moment. But that gift and that possibility of being free are subject to the need of a coherent, internal minimum between that which is believed and that which is said. One speaks in English of integrity, and it seems to me that in Spanish it is also the proper word: integrity. Cohesion in a single component of character, beliefs and the discourse that expresses it; the submission of the verb to the truth above all else.

But it is convenient to warn that integrity is as much a virtue of people with spiritual strength as it is a powerful need of human nature. Man needs to be integral, requires that there be no fissures between his conscience and his word, and when he

breaks that rule, because of personal convenience or external impositions, what is produced is what is popularly known as a guilty conscience.

The question is serious because, upon assuming the legacy of the language, that gift from a remote past that we have inherited from millions of men, it comes to us as well a singular setback: society, the media through which we acquire the possibility of communicating, that is, of being free. We start to haggle over this magnificent marriage from the moment we assume control over it. From that moment, the battle between our will to use words without limit nor fear, and the will of society to impose limits on our ability to express ourselves, has never ended, and perhaps that is the territory and the battlefield where man's most memorable spiritual adventures have taken place.

What was the episode between Galileo and his inquisitors but a battle to shut him up or to allow him to say certain words? Like Copernicus before him, Galileo knew that the Sun, and not the Earth, was the center of our planetary system; that the Earth was not mobile in space and that it orbited the Sun. But he could not say so because that violated the sacred texts of his group. In the end, out of fear, Galileo gave in, delivered his speech and accepted the untruth. Out of that came the melancholy sense of his famous phrase: »Nevertheless, it moves.«

Galileo was unable, really, to keep quiet, because to do so would break the intimate coherence, would destroy the moral integrity that the man needed in order to live his life.

José Martí said that freedom was the right that all honorable men had to think and speak without hypocrisy, and it appears to me that of the thousands of maxims that Martí wrote throughout his life, that is one of the most exact, one of the most intelligent, one of the most surprisingly syncretical.

If we go a bit below the surface of this definition, we will also find ourselves face to face with one of the deepest and most destructive roots of totalitarianism: hypocrisy, the shameless denial of evident truth. Because hypocrisy is the foundation on which tyranny is always sustained.

Tyranny, especially when it reaches the monstrous limits of totalitarianism, as in Cuba, always has an oblique truth, some sacred texts that cannot be appealed with which reality is interpreted and explained, and before which many back down with the mechanical repetition of the official line. Faced with it, many assume hypocrisy or surrender the word: silence.

How do tyrants manage to achieve this manner of monstrous abject obedience? The experience is overwhelming: it is achieved through fear of punishment. First, use is made of the language to demonize the transgressor. He is called traitor, divisionist, revisionist, worm or any other qualifier of an ominous connotation that implies a punishment. The moral sanction is only a warning, a black herald of the physical sanction to follow. The truth doesn't matter. Nor the integrity of the people. The only thing that interests the tyrant is to hear the unanimous chorus of his subordinates in order to find that vague rumor of legitimacy that he needs to justify his actions, because he and his accomplices also require a certain formal coherence, a rationality. Brute force does not exist in a pure state since man learned to speak and articulate his message. To exercise it, one has to construct a false message, contrary to reality, but endowed with its own logic of its other truth.

Order always seeks the rigid submission of words, because every violated rule moves the group into uncertainty, so the first thing sought is the domination of words, grabbing them by the tail to prevent any unforeseen changes. But the nature of language is uncertainty, that power of selecting this phrase over that one, that ironic tone or that dissonant or solemn one. Language is always suspect for the established order. Nevertheless, that implicit uncertainty in the nature of language, in its almost infinite variety of combinations, cliques milimetrically with the exercise of freedom.

Freedom is also choice, uncertainty, risk. One is free when he can say or write what he thinks, or when he can choose between various options. It

doesn't work when one follows a course imposed by others, even if it's a correct course, but only when one is allowed to fail or choose an alternative.

The most closed societies are precisely those that tighten the circle of usable words. Obviously, words cannot be completely curtailed, because there always exists the possibility of taking the ultimate freedom, that of not continuing to live. The moral asphyxiation of Cubans and their potential to express publicly their thoughts is a terrible daily phenomena that has been curtailed on this beautiful island for forty years. In Cuba, a totalitarian society since 1959, the greatest possible violence is used against the language. Even more: this is exactly what makes the Cuban revolution totalitarian and which allows the rest of the violence.

In a totalitarian world, there is a specific way, correct, frightfully correct, of analyzing reality. In a totalitarian world, the commissars, the owners of the truth, have taken over words, and they force the repetition, as in an endless litany, of the »sacred books« which are mentioned in speeches. In Cuba, there is no room, without risk, for interpretations. The interpretations are called heresy or diversions, or they're called any epithet full of bad omens. This control has become greater with Law 88, aimed at punishing even more, if that's possible, the independent journalists, but also society: gagging everyone, decimating through fear. The gag law tells us what we can read, what we can write, what we can believe of all that is human and divine, without infringing on the revolutionary certainty. Whoever strays from these limits, whoever allows himself to be carried away by doubt and sows uncertainty, can bring down upon himself reprisal from the »owners of the truth,« from the masters of the word. That's the fate of the four compatriots of the Nation is for All [who were sentenced to prison earlier this year].

The battle for freedom always has taken place and always will in the field of language. The missiles, the cannons, all the paraphernalia on display are nothing more than the final expression of a phenomena whose heart lies in the possibility that man has of saying or writing certain things. Society becomes open when it manages to examine without fear its past and present in order to foresee the future or one of the possible futures. Castro has said it: there will be no change, no opening.

The fight of the Cubans today must consist in the effort to achieve the right of freedom of expression

and of the fundamental rights of man. We independent journalists have the duty, despite this tightening of the screws, to fight against all attempts to restrict the use of the word; our moral duty is to continue reporting the reality of what takes place in Cuba. And not because it constitutes a position of the human being as pleasant and tolerant, but because free speech, the unrestricted free flow of information, where everything can be examined and critiqued unmercifully (even criticized unjustly) is the best vaccination there is against totalitarianism. After all, there is no other vaccination against totalitarianism than words

that come freely from the consciences and hearts of men without fear. The opposite would be simply intolerable. ┘

Letter to Cuban dissidents

Open letter to the Cuban dissidents on the Occasion of the 10th anniversary of democratic revolution in Central and Eastern Europe.

*Dear Martha Beatriz Roque, Felix Bonne,
Rene Gomez Manzano, Vladimiro Roca,*

In these days, we are commemorating the tenth anniversary of the changes that brought the end of the totalitarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and launched the process of democratization in our part of the world.

The results of the past decades show that the path from a closed to an open society can be arduous. In spite of all the difficulties which have accompanied the transformation of our society, however, we have been constantly aware of the enormous gift that is freedom. We still keep in mind those fantastic moments, when we realized that communist dictatorships have truly come to an end and that we have lived to see something many of us did not dare to hope for. The events in which we were taking part were not a sort of deviation from relentless historical necessity, but a genuine revolution, fundamentally transforming our lives and bringing us a true liberation.

At this time, we also think of you and we believe that your longing for a free Cuba will also be fulfilled one day. It is really you – and not your jailers – who realize Marti's ideal in practice. It is you – and not them – who represent the best revolutionary

traditions of your country, and who – together with other courageous Cubans, dedicated to the cause of liberty, of inalienability of human rights and human dignity – are the guarantee of a better future. Please accept our admiration, our thanks and our assurance that we are with you in your difficult situation. If our transformation experiences and the lessons we learned can serve as an inspiration – or as good or bad examples – for Cuba, when the time comes, we are ready to help you, in a spirit of solidarity. ┘

*With all good wishes and best regards,
Your friends, former fellow dissidents of East-Central Europe,*

*Rudolf Battek, Czech Republic
Marek Benda, Czech Republic
Martin Benda, Czech Republic
Larisa Bogorazova, Russia
John Bok, Czech Republic
Yelena Bonner, Russia
Bogdan Borusewicz, Poland
Jan Carnogursky, Slovakia
Jiri Dienstbier, Czech Republic
Wladyslaw Frasyniuk, Poland
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