

The Persisting US Cultural Blockade of Cuba

The virtual blockade of Cuba has the greatest impact when it comes to the prohibition of showing in the best of Cuban creativity on US soil.

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The renowned Latin Grammy awards — bestowed in the US by the National Academy of Recording Arts and Science, to acknowledge the best of the recording industry on the continent— continue to run up against the policy that restricts cultural ties between the US and Cuba.

The examples the treatment of bands such as Los Van Van and the Compay Segundo group are well known; these groups were denied visas by the US State Department to attend the awards ceremony because they are from Cuba. Examples can be also found in other expressions of the arts.

This was discussed with the Juventud Rebelde newspapers by Fernando Rojas, Cuba's deputy minister of Culture.

The senior officer, reviewing the current cultural relations between the two countries, believes that the bond is historical and intense.

“We are nations marked by the number of culture influences on each other. Cuban popular music influenced the creation of American music, and jazz has had the same influence on ours.”

“In Cuba, we are familiar with American music and follow their literature. We have published their greatest authors many times. Plus, Ernest Hemingway lived here; it's something we feel proud of, because he wrote a great part of his work in Cuba.

“There is a relationship of respect between the two countries, a relation of understanding, a need to know each other and to continue deepening those relations. The American people know the Cuban Ballet Company, and Alicia Alonso, who has been a very important person on the stages in that country. They also know the most recent popular music. These elements are captivating for the American audience. This interdependence has mutually enriched us. All we have to lament is that the blockade does not allow the growth and cultivation of these relations.”

JR — Regarding its economic affect on culture this year, how much is the impact of the blockade?

FR — Some affects have to do with our incomes. As a consequence of the blockade we don't get any profit from the exports of goods and services to the US market or by negotiation through third countries. We've already done the math. In terms of our participation in events, and particularly in those related to books and academic congresses, we have calculated that our absence from those affairs. Being unable to market or sell anything, we have lost \$70,000. Meanwhile, the daily commercialization of literature has cost us \$ 80,000. The affects in the payments for author rights, because of the prohibitions from exporting to that market, are estimated at 30 percent of the total of the expenditures for that activity.

In the discography, another important branch given the interest on Cuban music, it is estimated that around \$300,000 has been lost in the case of Bismusic, an ARTEX musical record label. In the case of EGREM, the numbers are around a million dollars. The figures indicate that we unable to earn \$1,300,000 because we have not been able to export our CD's. The same occurs with fine arts; we have not been able to ship any Cuban work of art to the United States, meaning a loss of around \$800,000."

There are examples that show the additional expenditures we have to incur in sending our exports to other markets. It is estimated that in the case of discography, the expenditures increase by 20 percent.

For that same reason, there are differences in the prices. This increases the volume of exports, and has a negative economic effect. For ARTEX, for example, this has meant a loss of \$107,000.

Production obstacles become evident when we cannot sign up for production services with US companies. The consequences of the blockade also results in an increase in insurance and transportation costs. For example, an estimate done for the publisher Ediciones Cubanas shows they had to pay out an extra \$160,000 US, ARTEX shelled out an extra \$178,000, and companies related to fine arts paid an extra \$20,000.

Monetary and financial obstacles are limiting factors. A bank with its headquarters in the United States cannot make payments to banks in Cuba; this has resulted in a loss of approximately \$100,000 to publishers.

JR — You have mentioned some essential figures, but how can we measure the damages of the blockade in terms of culture?

FR — That's the most important. What the US and Cuban people are loosing is much more serious than any dollar figure. However, I think that they are loosing more than us because here in Cuba we always make an effort to show the best creations from all cultures. Nonetheless, we have another problem: sometimes we don't show the most representative of the US culture industry. That's something we have to solve.

But there is no doubt that US people are missing an extraordinary treasure, a cultural wealth. That's the main effect of the blockade on culture: a tremendous difficulty to know each other better and enjoy each other's artistic creations.

JR — What impact does the Washington policy have on the cultural exchange between the two countries? What are the groups, artists, personalities and institutions that have been recently effected?

FR — Visa denials have affected artists such as Digna Guerra, a great singer and choir director. Researchers from different fields and young members of the Hermanos Saíz Association were also affected. Cuban filmmakers weren't allowed to participate in the Havana Film Festival of New York.

Something similar has happened when visas were denied to artists and writers to participate in Puerto Rico's Book Fair. As it's known, these documents must be granted by the US State Department. The same has happened to workers of the Heritage Council, who have tried to attend to meetings in the United States related to preserving of Ernest Hemingway's legacy. This hinders agreement signed to protect it.

Thus, we can say that the granting of visas has decreased year after year, until they became non-existent.

The report presented by Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque shows unprecedented situations, such as the non-publication in the United States of books by José Lezama Lima and Virgilio Piñera, just because they were Cuban. [There is no way that universities and magazines can pay and obtain a licence.] These situations limit the relation between Cuban and US artists, researchers and scholars.

JR — Can the extraterritoriality of these laws be a substantial element to prevent the presentation of foreign artists in Cuba?

FR — Of course. There are specific examples of projects that haven't been carried out. The filming of a project related to Hemingway hasn't materialized for this reason. Great US filmmaker Steven Soderbergh (*Sex, lies and videotape*, *Traffic*, *Erin Brockovich*) is currently producing a movie on Che and has had difficulties to be able to work in Cuba. Michael Moore, as it's publicly known, has been investigated for having filmed in Cuba.

Restrictions to travel to the United States and the risks faced by those who come here are common. In fact, when a person visits the Island, we have to be careful with the news related to this person's presence; that's an uncomfortable situation.

To come here is really an act of courage, while it's perceived there as a hostile act. Exchanges between artists and creators with the public are considered dissent in the United States. It sounds absurd, but unfortunately that's the way it is.

JR — What impact does the blockade against Cuba have on artistic teaching and its internationalist program of granting scholarships?

FR — The internal impact of the blockade has done the most to limit art education and the development of our teachers and students, not only economically but also terms of their very artistic talent. This is due to the lack of materials, equipment, accessories and so on... we have had to look for alternatives and solutions to acquire these at greatly higher costs in third countries in many instances. In other cases, we have had the solidarity of people, groups, institutions and non-governmental organizations that, unselfishly, have contributed them to us through donations, something which is highly valued by these educational centers and by the leadership of the country.

Another of the negative aspects is the constant egging on of our teachers, students and representatives in general, from different institutions of artistic instruction to emigrate. They are offered extremely advantageous proposals such as scholarships and economic privileges with the purpose of weakening the system and discrediting our revolution.

In spite of that adverse situation, this has not stopped the development of artistic teaching, which has been prioritized in the budget, so that our students receive all that is necessary for their education as future professionals of Cuban culture.

Something that is also evidenced is the support that we offer to the movement of young talent, their participation in events, workshops and international competitions, where the name of our country is elevated; and examples of this are the multiple awards obtained on the international level by our different centers and institutions that belong to the System of the Artistic Teaching.

JR — Is Cuban culture an attractive product for American business?

FR — Without a doubt. There is the interest and desire to work together, but the same thing happens: pressures and the difficulties erected against working with our culture industry discourage people. The formalization of relationships are now absolutely impossible by law.

JR — What cultural realms in the country would benefit from lifting the blockade?

FR — I believe that all of them would. The first thing is that we should get to know each other and exchange creative works. That is essential. There would be more capacity to come closer. And later, of course, there would be opportunities to import and export such easy access to that market, because there is a demand for Cuban music, dance and cinema.

There are millions of people in United States who speak Spanish and this makes it a natural market. Problems like that of freight and those linked with the financial transactions described earlier would all be solved. We would have many advantages.

JR — A reality exists: the culture of the island has found antidotes against the American ban. How do we establish our strategy in other parts of the world in spite of the pressures?

FR — We have the vocation for dealing with all countries and peoples. It is in the very roots of Cuban culture, in our internationalism and in the way in which we make foreign policy. We sustain diplomatic relationships with most countries.

Diversity is the essence what is national, something that we have transformed into a daily practice. We promote the enjoyment of local and universal art. We practice a policy of wide reasoning and reciprocity. The result is that there are an increasing number of festivals and weeks of culture; as many as in other countries. At the same time we send delegations to other nations of the world.