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Review/Reseña

Robin D. Moore *Music and Revolution: Cultural Change in Socialist Cuba*.
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The Rhythms of the Cuban Revolution

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Given the circulation of global ideological discourses about the end of socialism, and the turn of many former socialist states towards the market, why write about Cuban socialism today? This is the question that Robin Moore poses in one of the last chapters of his book *Music and Revolution*, an overview of the development of musical forms under the Cuban socialist system. He recounts that on recent trips to Havana, some friends discouraged him from writing about socialism and the arts because these issues were passé. Ordinary Cubans themselves do not seem terribly concerned with socialist politics, but rather with getting food on the table and earning an income. But Moore finds that the moment of crisis and change that has occurred as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, a

period referred to as the “special period,” has opened up unprecedented space for discussion about the successes and failures of socialist policies. The “boom” of works dealing with socialism and post-socialism in the contemporary period perhaps comes from these openings and from the realization that it is during times of transformation that socialism can be better understood.

Moore’s *Music and Revolution* is concerned with the disconnect between socialist ideals and practices, examining the ideals that state socialist societies strive for and the realities of what they actually do. Moore sees the arts as a point of negotiation between official organizations on the one hand, and individuals, with their own backgrounds and interests, on the other. He uses the arts as a way of entering into an analysis of the national cultural apparatus that was developed under the revolution, how performers have responded to the ideological priorities of institutions, but also, how they have created spaces for their own individual concerns within a socialist system.

Cuban cultural production on the island has been poorly understood in the west, particularly in the United States. Cuban artists have been represented as either trapped in some nostalgic, pre-revolutionary era such as in the *Buena Vista Social Club*, or they have been depicted as victims of an overly zealous authoritarian apparatus, that stifles individual creative expression. Moore demonstrates how neither of these are the case, and in fact, the revolutionary period has been one of cultural effervescence and vitality. He details the policies put in place soon after the 1959 revolution, that brought culture and the arts to ordinary citizens. The Amateurs’ Movement (Movimiento de Aficionados) began in 1960 and involved Cubans in neighborhood mural projects, local theatre and dance troupes, and music ensembles in work places, unions, students groups, agricultural collectives, and in the neighborhoods. Along with the Professional Improvement Schools (Escuelas de Superación Profesional), which ran classes in musician notation, harmony, and music theory, the Amateurs’ Movement made musical study available to the average Cuban. In addition, the government established several institutions for musical study. The Institute of Ethnology and Folklore (IEF) sought to disseminate

the sacred repertoire of Afro-Cubans for much of the 1960s. The Escuela Nacional de Arte (National School of Art, ENA), was opened in 1962 on the grounds of the formerly elite Havana Country Club. The school offered study in drama, theater, music, ballet, and visual arts, and it had about three hundred students who were enrolled. Study was free and students were able to devote themselves to full time study. The rich wealth of musical production under the revolution that the book examines is due at least in part to these socialist policies that sought to develop the musical potential of artists and ordinary citizens.

But at the same time, socialist Cuba was not free from censorship and cooptation, practices that Moore makes clear to emphasize are also found in capitalist societies. He points in particular to the *quinquenio gris*, the “five year grey stretch” between 1968 and 1973 that occurred as the vibrant and fluid period of the 1960s came to a close and Cuba entered a more orthodox phase of the revolution as it deepened relations with the Soviet Union. During the 1970s, artists suffered from open censorship, loss of employment and party membership, and internment.

Censorship and cooptation often came in waves, as Moore explains in the case of nueva trova. Nueva trova, initially known as *canción protesta* (protest song), came out of the broader tradition of radical folk music in Latin America. While early nueva trova artists were closely affiliated with the Cuban revolution, they entered into conflicts with authorities during the late 1960s. Officials arraigned Pablo Milanés for homosexuality in 1966 and sent him for a year to a UMAP (Unidades Militares para la Ayuda a la Producción) prison in Camaguey, while Silvio Rodríguez was detained various times by the police in the late 1960s and sent to an *encampamiento* for reeducation. But by the late 1970s, as the movement continued to grow, there was less state repression and greater promotion of nueva trova as an expression of revolutionary Cuba. Other musicians and artists were also subject to these waves of tolerance and censorship. Several decades later, rap musicians were also to encounter suspicion and hostility from state officials, only to be later heralded as the voice of the revolution, with Fidel himself rapping along at a concert and a special agency being created for rappers.

Going even deeper, beyond the standard debates about artistic freedom versus censorship in socialist society, Moore looks at the contradictions inherent in the cultural policy of the revolutionary process. Socialist ideology was concerned with the democratization of culture, and in many of its practical efforts, the Cuban state did bring the arts out of the realm of the elite classes and accessible to ordinary Cubans. Yet from the 1970s onwards Moore documents the decline of mass arts education and the formation of an artistic elite. European classical music was generally promoted in schools and arts institutions over popular music such as rumba, carnival, and religious music. Many of the instructors who came to Cuba to establish music programs were from Eastern Europe, and had little knowledge of local traditions.

These contradictions were particularly profound in the field of Afro-Cuban musical production. As Moore describes it, the revolutionary government had always seen Afro-Cuban arts at the center of a unique Cuban identity. Afro-Cuban traditions such as drumming received promotion and support from state institutions. A large number of Afro-Cuban music ensembles emerged from the Amateurs' Movement. Rumba groups such as Los Muñequitos de Matanzas were featured on television, and *cabildos* performed in Havana theatres for the first time. The Festivals of Popular Culture which began in 1962 showcased Afro-Cuban cultural expressions. At the same time, officials have always held a negative view of practices such as drumming as "backward" and "primitive." There were attempts by the state to regulate carnival ensembles (*comparsas*), which were seen as unruly cultural practices. Likewise, dance music, a form associated predominantly with poor black communities, received less promotion after 1970 and the performance space for dance bands was reduced. The tension between these elite biases towards Afro-Cuban music and the desire to present it as a symbol of nationhood were not limited to the revolutionary period. As Moore's earlier book *Nationalizing Blackness* demonstrates, similar tensions were faced by the Afrocubanismo movement in the 1920s and 1930s.

The question of race could perhaps have received deeper treatment if rap music had been explored in this study. Moore acknowledges early on

that he cannot cover all forms of musical expression under the revolution, and the scope of what he covers here is impressive. However, in comparing contemporary timba music with nueva trova, as “the youth music of a generation earlier,” Moore seems to come to the conclusion that an earlier generation of nueva trova performers and audiences (in some cases, white and college educated) were concerned with socialist struggle and international politics, while the new generation of timba musicians, as black and working class artists, are more grounded in local experience, using irreverent lyrics that deprecate women and talk about the realities of life in the special period. These descriptions may be accurate, but the comparison between generations cannot be complete without taking into account the highly politicized movement of contemporary rap music, a black, working class form which projects a revolutionary politics but is also a narrative of everyday life. Rap music reflects the tensions between Afro-Cubans and the state in a period of crisis, and it brings into strong relief a number of the concerns raised in this book.

Moore closes the book by considering the changes that have been brought about by the special period. He argues that popular music has provided a vehicle for reflections on everyday life during a time of hardship, debates about the country’s future, and irreverent commentary on the attempts of the state to deal with the crisis. The examples that he gives are humorous and revealing: Adalberto Álvarez’s reference to financial “touching” of illegal business deals in “El baile del toca-toca;” the discussion of *jineterismo* or prostitution in Charanga Habanera’s “La turística;” or NG La Banda’s satire on *picadillo de soya* (soy hamburger), a much-despised meat distributed by the government in place of real meat. Moore addresses the importance of music in generating revenue for the government during a time of hardship as resulting in new opportunities for social critique.

Music and Revolution provides an excellent introduction to musical forms of the Cuban revolution. It is written in an accessible style, and has much to offer specialists and non-academics alike who are interested in the musical legacy of the revolution. While, as Moore notes, US foreign policy seems to have dispensed with the idea that music and the arts might help

build bridges and mutual understanding in place of animosity, this book demonstrates how very wrong that policy is.