
Interview with Abel Prieto: "David has been able to resist Goliath"

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Appreciated for his talent and people skills, he has served the director of Letras Cubanas Publishing House. Abel Prieto quickly achieves unanimity among Cuban intellectuals and artists. In 1968, he was selected to direct the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC), thus becoming one of the youngest presidents in the history of the institution.

During a meeting with Fidel Castro in mid-1990s, Abel Prieto shared his disagreements with him and stated his point of view. Some thought that his career would be irreparably damaged, but it was not the case. Quite the contrary, several weeks later, the Cuban president decided to appoint him as Culture Minister in 1997, post that he would hold until 2012.

His exceptional longevity in the Ministry of Culture is explained by his spirit of openness and ability to federate Cuban intellectual and artistic world around the cultural policy of the country. Indeed, during his tenure, Abel Prieto always rejected sectarianism and privileged the debate of ideas, something that earned him the recognition and admiration of the culture world, which also appreciates his professionalism and deep human qualities.

In March 2012, after fifteen years of good and loyal services, Abel Prieto left the Ministry of Culture to become special adviser to Cuban President Raul Castro, thereby consolidating a brilliant career. Moreover, he also holds a deputy position in the National Assembly of People's Power.

Abel Prieto is also known in Cuba because of his large collection of popular jokes and

anecdotes. It's said that during official meetings, government members push one and other in order to sit beside him, geared at enjoying his talent as a storyteller and having a good time.

Scholar of writer Jose Lezama Lima, Abel Prieto is also author of several novels among which there appear **El vuelo del gato** (The Flight of the Cat) and **Viajes de Miguel Luna** (Travels of Miguel Luna).

In this dialogue, Abel Prieto evokes the impact of the economic sanctions of the US blockade on Cuba in the field of culture, the rapprochement with United States, the challenges of Cuba at present and his relationships with Fidel Castro.

Salim Lamrani: Abel Prieto, you were Culture Minister for fifteen years. Today, you're adviser to President Raul Castro in the field of culture. What's your role?

Abel Prieto: My task is to promote Cuban culture and to guarantee that Cuban cultural institutions promote the best talents of our country. My job also includes linking culture and people, developing cultural relations worldwide and to defend the cultural policy of the Revolution.

SL: The US policy toward Cuba, particularly its economic sanctions, has an impact on Cuban culture. What's your point of view on this?

AP: The economic impact is evident. President Barack Obama allows cultural exchanges but they're non-commercial ones. Many artists, such as Van Van, Carlos Varela, the National Ballet School, Silvio Rodriguez, toured U.S., but they haven't received a cent for their performances.

The world's biggest art market is the US market. Our artists, writers, intellectuals do not have access to it. Our publishing houses, our art galleries and our cultural enterprises are banned from entry into the United States.

The North American people miss a great possibility of enriching contacts with our people, due to an irrational, absurd and indefensible policy. The same applies to the Cuban people, so curious intellectually, so insatiable from the cultural point of view, who is prevented from a fruitful exchange with its northern neighbor.

When these exchanges take place in Cuba, as well as during the visit of a US artist, the effects are amazing. I recall the **Music Bridge** that we created several years ago and many US artists travelled to Cuba to exchange with Cuban artists. They recorded a disc together, a big concert highly appreciated by the population. It was something very beautiful because the two cultures are very close and nurture each other for decades.

SL: Is Cuba willing to approach United States?

AP: Cuba would benefit a lot from a rapprochement with U.S. It's true that an avalanche of North American tourists would bring the culture of consumerism, but I think the positive aspects would broadly outweigh the negative ones. Many US citizens are very curious to discover "the forbidden island", because it's the only country in the world where they are banned to visit. I remember a meeting with an important US filmmaker at Chaplin movie in Havana and he was astonished to see the modernity of the place and the celebration of the film festival every year, etc. It shows how Cuba's image in US society does not correspond to reality. Of course, the best antidote against it is our cultural message, which will touch the American people with all its

vigor and authenticity and will destroy stereotypes.

SL: Wouldn't there be risks in that rapprochement?

AP: Would our identity suffer? I believe we have an advantage. Cuban national identity and national culture have a very strong resistance core and, at the same time, they nurture from external contributions. We are descendants of Spanish settlers. We are also fruit of African slaves and the legacy of that terrible genocide. We're also the result of Chinese, Polish immigration, etc. Cuba is a mixed culture able to absorb everything without threatening its deep nature.

So, I do not think we will lose our identity with a massive arrival of American tourists. American culture is pretty present in Cuba and reaches us through cinema, television and music, and from the half a million Cuban Americans who visit us every year. Cultural hegemony associated with globalization is affecting us and the response has to do with the educational order. We need to consolidate love for one's own among our youth, without falling into cultural chauvinism. We're pretty proud of what we've done as a nation, of the novelties that we contribute in cultural terms, but we will always remember that famous phrase by José Martí: "Homeland is Humanity". We do not see our reality as the center of the world. Our vocation is universalist, as José Martí and Fidel Castro taught us. I think that in terms of values, Americans could only enrich themselves with a fruitful exchange with Cubans.

What harms us is the current situation, which is perverse because it bans us from purchasing medicines for sick children, with an authority that pursues us constantly, tracks the banks that have business relations with us. It is a cruelty.

SL: What are the obstacles for a full normalization of relations between the two nations?

AP: I think we must go back to the 19th century to understand the history of the dispute that opposes Cuba to the United States. John Quincy Adams developed the "ripe fruit" theory. Cuba should gravitate into the US orbit. To the northern strategists, the island belonged to their area of influence. José Martí denounced it vigorously.

In 1959, Cuba achieved its Independence and has become a big moral power, which shows the world that it's possible to confront imperialism. Cuba is an example of sovereignty for Latin America and the world. Cuba has demonstrated its great tenacity in the defense of its principles. I think that is what the United States does not forgive us. David has been able to resist Goliath. Although we change our model and adopt the savage capitalism that is destroying mankind, they will not forgive us this affront. United States only accepts subordination. It has not lost hope of turning Cuba into a colony. See that the pretexts to maintain its hostility against Cuba change with the times.

In general, U.S. has shown pragmatism in its foreign policy and that is a feature of their idiosyncrasy. But in the case of Cuba, this classical tradition disappears in favor of an irrational attitude. U.S. knows how to display its greatness in some aspects. However, in terms of its policy against Cuba, it is very small. Its attitude is dishonorable, because it's inglorious to siege a country that has never attacked the United States.

SL: Some say that Cuban authorities use the economic sanctions as an excuse to explain the failure of the system.

AP: So why don't they leave us without that excuse? Wouldn't it be more didactical to do that? Why don't they take away that pretext to show the world that our model of society is inefficient?

That does not mean that we haven't made mistakes. This Revolution has been built by men and women, and it is not a divine work. By definition, it is imperfect.

SL: Despite the weight of history, is Cuba willing to open its arms to the United States?

AP: Our President Raúl Castro has stated several times that we're willing to dialogue as equals, especially on all conceivable topics, without attempting against our principles, our dignity nor to our rights. We will always accept a respectful dialogue between two sovereign countries.

SL: What would be the benefit for the United States in case of a change of policy?

AP: From the economic point of view, the US tourist industry would be the main beneficiary from a normalization of relations between our two countries. In terms of image, that would have a very positive impact for U.S., which would leave its isolation, as well as for US citizens, who would recover their right to travel to Cuba, to trade with the island. From the moral perspective, all decent people living in U.S., and there are many, would feel proud of a change of policy towards Cuba.

SL: What are the challenges for today's Cuba?

AP: We are waging a great battle against bureaucracy, which is a scourge for our country that has caused us untold harm. Of course, this applies to the field of culture. I see every day how that bureaucracy consumes energy and resources, and wastes funds without any relation with cultural processes. We should build a more efficient socialism, more natural, less sectarian, more daring, and more revolutionary.

We have opened our economy to private enterprises. Self-employment has already existed in the cultural sector with plastic arts artists, who create wealth with their works and strengthen the spiritual network of our nation. We have many artists who are not employees of the State and have not become conservative or reactionary. There is some vulgar Marxism that came with Soviet manuals, which associates private job with reaction and that describes it as an enemy of the people. Actually, it is quite the opposite because small businesses and cooperatives strengthen socialism.

Similarly, our Communist Party should open more to diversity, critical analysis, disagreement and debate. It should be less dogmatic.

Our path is authentically Cuba and involves the entire population, but we do not intend to be a model.

SL: What would be your message for the people of the United States?

AP: There are many decent and honest people in U.S., no matter the political trend; I would ask them for a more lucid solidarity with Cuba to end a cruel, anachronistic and irrational policy. I am convinced that many Americans oppose the blockade. I also want that the American people be better informed about our country because there are many lies circulating about Cuba. We are

economically besieged as well as from the media standpoint. The Cuban people and the American people should walk together on the path of the future.

SL: What does Fidel Castro represent for you?

AP: I was eight years old when the Cuban Revolution triumphed. My father was a member of the July 26th Movement, disciple of José Martí and a great admirer of Fidel Castro. I remember the long speeches by Fidel Castro on television. I did not understand much because I was very young but he was someone who captivated people.

I remember Fidel during the missile crisis and the courage of our people. We ran the risk of being wiped off the face of the earth but there was no panic among the population.

When I was at the University, I saw him several times. I met him in person at Casa de las Americas in the 1970s. There was a workshop for young writers and Roberto Fernández Retamar introduced him to me. I remember that Fidel joked with Gabriel García Márquez who was with him and asked him: Do you think that one of them will be a Nobel Prize laureate someday?"]

When I became the president of the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba, I had the exceptional privilege, during a congress, to meet Fidel. I remember that a friend had told me that Fidel was never interested in superficial things and asked many questions. Then, I prepared myself and gathered extensive data about UNEAC members, by province, the number of women, the generational spectrum, etc. I learned them by heart. The following day, I arrived at the meeting with my nerves on edge. I remember his first question because I did not have the answer: "How many square meters does the courtyard of UNEAC headquarters have?" My secretary gave me a figure, obviously false and Fidel laughed. I think I have the national record in making mistakes with Fidel because I always give him wrong data.

It has been a great privilege since I found a man who had great strategic vision with a passion for details. He is able to synthesize the future of mankind and at the same time to assess every detail very accurately.

SL: What is the importance of Fidel Castro for Cuban culture?

AP: Fidel is a brilliant intellectual, a great reader. Retamar told me one day that Fidel did not use to read José Martí but breathed him. There is a great link between Martí and Fidel, though they are from two different times.

I remember that in 1994, during the Special Period, with a very serious economic crisis, Fidel met with us at the UNEAC and said: "The first thing to be saved is culture". We had six hours of electricity a day. It was a bitter moment, a very hard time from the material standpoint. But priority went to culture.

Fidel drew up a cultural policy pretty different from the "socialist realism" of Eastern Europe, very open, very united, with a constant involvement of artists from all generations and trends. This political policy saved us because our enemies have never been able to count on a fifth column among intellectuals. There has never been an intellectual opposition in Cuba paid by the United States. Fidel's thinking has enabled us to come up with a cultural policy distant from dogmas, exclusions, a vanguard cultural policy. Fidel always joined the intellectual vanguard of our country, the artistic vanguard of our nation. He also encouraged that vanguard to work in

favor of people's inclusion within culture. It was not an elitist alliance but a unifying alliance. To Fidel, culture is essential to transform people, for human emancipation. Fidel used to say the following a lot: "Without culture, freedom is not possible".

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