

# From Movement to Government: Formation of Leftist Film Policy in Russia, China and Cuba

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This article follows the evolution of Marxist aesthetics and its approach to art and culture, examining the popular debates surrounding popular versus people's cinema and the distinctions between high art and low art. It delves into the socio-political contexts of the three case studies of the USSR, China, and Cuba, exploring how these nations articulated their party ideologies and artistic frameworks during revolutionary movements and their subsequent transitions into established governance. After assuming authorial powers, these objectives were converted into policies. Each of these countries has progressed in a sequence, with the USSR paving the way for China, which then influenced Cuba. Drawing from earlier discussions of Marxist aesthetics, this study analyses these policies, demonstrating how cinema was used to promote revolutionary values and address significant socio-political challenges during tumultuous periods. Finally, the study explicates that the once-evolving model of people's cinema in these countries has gradually withered away due to broader geopolitical factors, which deeply affected the smaller socialist countries and provincial leftist governments who have been consistently looking up to these superpowers for support and sustenance.

**1. Introduction**

Leftist cultural policy refers to the policies and initiatives that are influenced by left-wing ideology and principles. It illustrates how a leftist government intervenes in the field of art and culture in the state. Before delving into its nuances and background it is necessary to note that this concept is not a monolithic one and it varies according to the socio-political context, the political climate of the region, and more importantly, the goals of the leftist movement that have been functional before the consolidation of the government. It is evident from history that, leftist forces have always consolidated power after a series of prolonged mass movements. The objectives of such movements after their transition to government formulates the policies of the newly formed state. Some of the common objectives and themes can be traced as, promoting art and culture for social justice and equality, cultural diversity and inclusivity, supporting alternative and independent cultural expressions, democratization of culture and fostering cultural rights to every individual, critical engagement with traditional norms and practices and to facilitate dialogue, reflection, retrospection and debate on social issues through cultural interventions, to contribute to cultural transformation and progressive social change. To locate and

analyse the leftist cultural policy of West Bengal and India, it is important to take a look at its predecessors in different parts of the world. For which, this dissertation will go through the representative models of the countries, the USSR, China, and Cuba and their cultural policies, more precisely their film policies, measures, and initiatives undertaken by the state for the development of the indigenous film industries and their desire of constructing an identity through the alternative practice of filmmaking strikingly different from the Western film industries. Collaborations, co-productions, and different cultural events have been prevalent as a part of the cultural interaction and exchange between these countries. Especially, film festivals have been instrumental in fostering ties between their cinematic styles and ideologies. While the film industries of the capitalist countries are focused on the commercial markets and profit earning, the film industries governed by a leftist government are more concerned with the nation building, and ideological aspects of cinema, and from their policies, it is evident that how cinema can be used as a machinery and political tool as well, in the process of building a new society. Before delving into the structure and functioning of these leftist cultural models constructed by the aforesaid countries, we need to look for the leftist ideologue that has been appropriated and adapted by the governments

in the field of art and culture. Although, Karl Marx did not develop a comprehensive theory of art and culture but in his several writings he has addressed their role in society. Marx viewed art and culture as products of social and economic conditions. Art is not created in a vacuum but is shaped by the material circumstances and class relations prevalent in the society in which it emerges. Let's trace the arguments and opinions foregrounded by him for art and culture to thrive in the new society.

## 2. The Revolutionary Palette: Analysing Marx's Vision of Art, Artist, and State Dynamics

Karl Marx did not develop a comprehensive theory of art and culture, but in his several writings he has addressed their role in the society. Marx viewed art and culture as products of social and economic conditions. Art is not created in a vacuum but is shaped by the material circumstances and class relations prevalent in the society in which it emerges. Let's trace the arguments and opinions foregrounded by him for art and culture to thrive in the new society. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844), Marx argues that the division of labour generates alienating conditions of production, for which work is turned into a mere means of existence. So, in a de-alienated society and state of affairs, control and creative scope in production are restored to the worker, and there comes the displacement of wealth and poverty of political economy by "*the rich human being and the rich human need*" (Marx, 1988, p. 111). There is a sharp difference between artistic freedom and alienation, and according to this formulation, any non-alienated labour can be described as creative and the same holds true for artistic labour also. Hence, it is clear that division labour is responsible for the alienation of the worker from his essential nature of being creative. For which, there is always the presence of a special group called 'artists' in the society. Marx criticizes this specialized category of 'artists' in his next major work, *The German Ideology* in 1845. He writes, "*The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of division of labour... In any case, with a communist organisation of society. there disappears the subordination of the artist to local and national narrowness, which arises entirely from division of labour, and also the subordination of the individual to some definite art, making him exclusively a painter, sculptor, etc...*" (Marx and Engels, 1998, p. 417-418). Apart from this, Marx also radically problematizes the aspect of 'undivided labour', and states that a communist society will mark humanity's leap from the domain of necessity to the realm of freedom. Furthermore, his ideas and opinions on labour, commodity production, and alienation offers insight into how art's value is derived and perceived within capitalist societies. The commodity of an object and the same with a piece of art is determined by the socially necessary labour time given behind it by the other artist or the labour (Bottomore, 1991, p. 504). Under capitalism, these productions take on mystical fetishized quality, where the social and economic value becomes detached from value, which is true even for cultural products also. Hence, artists too can experience

alienation when their creative expression is subordinated to market forces and commercial interests. Moreover, cultural forms can be used to propagate and reinforce dominant social and economic ideologies which ultimately serve the interests of the ruling class. However, it is essential to note that, while Marx's theories provide valuable insights into the economic and social aspects of art's value, the concept of aesthetic value and artistic appreciation often goes beyond purely economic considerations. This economic analysis cannot always appropriate the cultural, emotional, and historical significance of a work of art. So, throughout history, scholars and critics have drawn various theoretical frameworks and Marx's perspectives to explore the complexities of art's value in different social, historical, and cultural contexts.

But for Marx's contemporary leftist theorists and philosophers, it was quite difficult to grasp these economic and philosophical theories and employ them in the field of art and culture. The determining role of economic relations in the theory of historical materialism was interpreted by them in a sketchy and superficial manner. As Adolfo Sanchez Vasquez points out that the humanist and revolutionary fervour and especially, the fundamental concept of the relationship between the base and superstructure in the realm of art and culture was eventually lost from the entire discourse (Vazquez, 1973, p. 11). When seen from the perspectives of the artists, the revolutions of 1789, 1848, and the Commune of 1871 brought forward many stalwart artists with the idea of social change. In the post-1890s, the cultural policy of the newly formed social-democratic parties became less reluctant and involved themselves mainly in the promotion of the arts. Their support helped to develop smaller theatre movements, and became influential among the Russian exiles and the concept of Proletkult came into being, guided by the need for the workers to create their own culture. The cultural and political avant-gardes played an important role in this revolution and so, the military concept of 'vanguard' of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was extended to the political progressives and stalwart artists at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Irrespective of their ideological positions majority of artists from all camps, led by their precarious financial existence joined hands with the political progressives since they were facing a common enemy. Many of them participated in the workers' and soldiers' council for the prospect of a new Russia and a Soviet Germany with the dream of a peaceful socialist Europe (Willet, 2018, p. 61-87). By the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century another wave of theoreticians and philosophers attempted to rediscover the vitality of Marxism, but their efforts were not enough to overcome the contradictions and combine social determinism and autonomy of art, and the entire discourse was limited to a critical framework that highlights the relationship between art and class struggle (Vazquez, 1973, p.12-13). Whereas, most of them overlooked that contradictions of relative autonomy of art had already been addressed by both Marx and Engels in their letters to Ferdinand Lassalle in 1859<sup>2</sup> (Marx and Engels, 1859, as cited in Baxandall, Morawski, 1973, p. 142) Engaging critically with the historical drama *Franz von Sickingen*, both of them criticized the incorrect interpretation of the tragic collision between 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and

their attempts to place literature above politics. They emphasized that realist writers should reflect a progressive world outlook, be permeated with progressive ideas, and deal with truly topical problems. These writings directly contributed to the formation of the concept of a leftist art practice, which is evident from the theatre movements in France and Germany in the 1890s. They mainly targeted the status quo, and dominant power structures and advocated for equality, uniform economic distribution, and social justice. Through their performances, they attracted a huge audience and so attempts were made by the revolutionary parties and organisations linked with them, to align these cultural movements with the regional workers' movements in the major cities and industrial belts. Moreover, they also argued that art actively influences social formation and development, maintaining significance beyond the social structures of its time. Marxist aesthetics emphasize art's lasting value and distinguish between progressive and reactionary elements in feudal and bourgeois culture. This forms the 'party approach' to art, evaluating it from the revolutionary class's perspective. As class roles evolve, so do the characters of exploitation and discrimination throughout history.

From the discussions so far, we can trace the development of Marxist aesthetics and its practical applications. Three main aspects emerge: 1) a Marxist approach to art criticism, 2) the role of Marxist artists in political movements, and 3) the formulation of party approaches to art and culture during political movements. While, the first two aspects are quite well discussed in the later years by scholars and theoreticians, who have made their valuable contributions to Marxist aesthetics and the Marxist method of criticism, in the case of the third not much critical energy has been spent and there remains scope for further developments. Irrespective of the frequent interventions of the first two, this article's primary concern will be the third one, the "Kulturpolitik" of a socialist government. Behind every socialist government there is a long history of political, mass, and civil rights movements led by leftist parties. Art and culture have historically played a significant role in these movements, making it crucial for leftist organizations to integrate their ideologies into cultural activities. The transition from movement to government provides a nuanced perspective on policy studies, as seen in early 20th century Russia. Lenin's 1905 article "Party Organization and Party Literature" addresses the relationship between art, ideology, and society, advocating for party-oriented literature. Lenin emphasized that true artistic freedom lies in aligning creative work with revolutionary causes, rather than the so-called freedom of bourgeois thinkers (Lenin, 1905). Consequently, the Bolsheviks, after gaining power, did not regiment art and culture but kept platforms open for experimentation. Despite Lenin's personal taste in art, he refrained from imposing it, recognizing the need for revolutionary art to shape the new society.

### 3. Soviet Cinema: Ideals to Institutional Frameworks

Lenin was among the first few to understand that to

achieve anything in the economic and political spheres, the workers and peasants must reach a certain standard of education. Lunacharsky in one of his early essays written few years before the Bolshevik Revolution, argued that art and culture is more 'evolutionary' rather than revolutionary, and the workers, who will be in the control of the means of production is not prepared enough to take control of the means of artistic production due to their lack of exposure and practice of the pre-revolutionary art forms (As quoted in Kay 1983). As a result, art and culture was taken under the control of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment or Narkompros and Lunacharsky, the founder of the popular culture movement in Russia was appointed as its head. In 1920, Moscow's main schools were merged into a new institution, the Higher State Art and Technical Studios, or VKhUTEMAS, with a so-called 'working-class' faculty and newly designed courses. On Lunacharsky's call the artists, especially Russians, who had studied abroad came back to take key positions in the nationalised institutions and the ministry as well. The state took different measures like nationalizing the theatres and the production processes of the film industry. Noteworthy of them is the documentary movement founded by Dziga Vertov as director and the American journalist John Reed as the writer. Together, they shot the first 'Kino-Pravda' newsreels. The following piece was first published by Kremlin on 27 August 1919 as a decree which he issued on the occasion of the transfer of the Photographic and Cinematographic Trade and Industry to the People's Commissariat of Education. It says:

*1. The entire photographic and cinematographic trade and industry, their organisation as well as the supply and distribution of technical means and materials appertaining to them, throughout the territory of the RSFSR, shall be placed within the province of the People's Commissariat of Education.1*

*2. To this end the People's Commissariat of Education is herewith empowered:*

*a. to nationalise, by agreement with the Supreme Council of National*

*Economy, particularly photo and cinema enterprises, as well as the entire photo and cinema industry;*

*b. to requisition enterprises as well as photo and cinema goods, materials and equipment;*

*c. to fix stable and maximum prices for photo and cinema raw materials and manufactured products;*

*d. to exercise supervision and control over the photo and cinema trade and industry and*

*e. to regulate the entire photo and cinema trade and industry by issuing decisions*

*which shall be binding on enterprises and private persons, as well as on Soviet Institutions, insofar as they relate to photo and cinema matters.*

*Chairman of the Council of the Peoples Commissars: V Ulyanov (Lenin)*

*Executive Officer of the Council of People's Commissars: Vlad Bonch-Bruyevich*

*(Lenin, 1919, as cited in MacKenzie, 2014, p.19)*

This is preferably the first instance of the state's intervention in the national film production, distribution,

and exhibition processes even before the intrusion of Hollywood films in the East European markets. The new government issued the policy of War Communism which initiated the shift from the market economy to the "natural" economy, and under this policy, other sectors like railways and industries ensured the distribution of all economic resources among the people according to need and that was only possible through the public agencies. Lunacharsky established a committee within the Commissariat with the responsibility of making and exhibiting educational and agitational documentaries to promote national enlightenment within the country. This committee took control of the equipment and film reserves of the Petrograd's Skobelev committee which made propaganda films during the Tsarist regime and under the provisional government. Following this, film committees were also established in Ukraine and Georgia in the same year (Kepler Jr. 1990). Just after the civil war, with the initiation of the New Economic Policy in March 1921, a significant shift can be observed especially in the field of art and culture. Cinema being the new medium received most of the attention and the state extended all sorts of support to the film studios and theatres. In 1922, the first state film trust was organized under the Goskino, the USSR State Committee for Cinematography. This central organ was responsible for all the film production and distribution throughout the state until 1924. The primary objective was not to appropriate any revolutionary art form for the sake of political activities and to try to reach the masses to educate them and make them aware.

The cultural exchanges between the USSR and neighbouring socialist republics like Hungary and the Weimar Republic developed in the following years fostering the concept of proletarian culture encompassing the working class across nations. The USSR and the Weimar Republic maintained cordial relations until the rise of German nationalism post-1929. The 1922 Treaty of Rapallo facilitated diplomatic and military cooperation within the two nations until Hitler's rise to power. In the same year, Lenin also established the Workers' International Relief (WIR) to counterbalance aid organizations from capitalist countries. Under the leadership of Willi Münzenberg, WIR promoted cultural exchanges, organized exhibitions, and distributed Soviet films abroad, with *Polikushka* (1922) being the first screened in Berlin. Cinema, seen as crucial for industrial and technological communication, was promoted by figures like Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin, with key films like *Eisenstein's Strike* (1925) and *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) produced by the Proletkult and the ministry directly as a part of the celebrations for the twentieth anniversary of the 1905 revolution (Willett, 2018). Lenin promoted leftist art and praxis, advocating for leftist practitioners to educate the working class, peasants, and common people. He also provided a platform for theorists to critique and support proletarian culture through a Marxist lens and emphasized the importance of disseminating revolutionary principles to the common population. This led to the shift of economic policy, where

art and culture were among the first sectors nationalized to create a broad cultural framework for the working class, capable of encompassing the working class transcending national boundaries. In essence, the ultimate aim was to amalgamate universal and class cultures into a cohesive entity by infusing the socialist essence into various forms of national cultures. The Communist Party, under its central committee developed and applied these cultural policies, with state institutions and party workers, making sure they were carried out and monitored. This model was an important instance of how the government institutions, party organizations and common people worked together in the cultural front. It opened up culture to the working class, letting them engage with global cultural trends. This move didn't just democratize culture; it also set the stage for future leftist policies and left a lasting impact on political thinkers and activists.

#### 4. Revolutionary Art: Mao's Cultural Strategy and Societal Integration in China

*"The purpose of our meeting today is precisely to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind."* (Zedong, 1942)

In China, after the War of Resistance against Japan broke out the Communist Party felt the urge to integrate these forces, for unifying the Chinese people and mobilizing the proletariat towards revolution. In the questions of attitude of the artists, Mao distinguished three categories as per the immediate scenario, the enemy, friends, and the members of the party, precisely the proletariat and their vanguard. On one hand, the task of the armed forces was to seize victory from the enemies, and on the other hand, the cultural forces were entitled to expose the enemies' exploits, atrocities, and encourage and unite anti-enemy forces. And those who were identified as friends, are to be both praised and criticised according to the position towards the enemies. Ridiculing the bourgeois and the middle class is not the goal of a leftist artist, rather it is necessary to show them the path of reform and unite them in the process of revolution. Due to the active movements to abolish feudalism and colonial exploitations and struggle against the nationalist and right-wing forces, years before the revolution, the Communist Party had strong hold in the Chinese film industry and directly influenced their works. Irrespective of the strife and internal conflict between the Communist Party and the Kuomintang, both Republic of China and the Taiwan-based governments unanimously regard and celebrate the canon of resistant films during 1930s and 40s.

In his speeches at Yanan, Mao resolved the debate over popular and people's art, high art, and low art, defining "popular" in the context of leftist cultural ideology. He argued that popularizing any artwork is only possible by aligning it with the thoughts and emotions of the masses—workers, peasants, and soldiers. Without direct contact with the masses, pre-revolutionary writers and artists would be "*heroes without a battlefield*," and their claim of "*art for*

*art's sake*," standing upright beyond social and economic inequalities, is just a misapprehension. In reality, art cannot be independent in a class-divided society, it will always reflect the dominant political demands. Pre-revolutionary art was thus isolated from the masses, with the concepts of high and low art tied to feudalism and the bourgeoisie. Mao stated that the goal of a revolutionary government is not to elevate art and literature to lofty heights, but to advance people's art in line with the proletariat's direction (Zedong, 1942). Unlike Lunacharsky, Mao believed that the means of artistic production should be straight away taken over by the proletariat after the revolution, without any sort of procedural training or exposure to pre-revolutionary art. He opined that the experiences of workers, peasants, and soldiers as the truest forms of cultural expression. Following Marx's concept of division of labour and alienation of the worker, Mao constructs the idea that the real artists are the workers due to their valuable experiences coupled with their enormous labour force. The only factor desisting the natural creativity of the proletariat is the bourgeoisie intelligentsia who have always devalued and scorned their works. So, by far this is the only way which could diminish the distinction between the segregated category of "artist" and their professional art work with art as a subsidiary for any creative worker. One can find such instances in painting exhibitions where the name of the artist is accompanied by their real occupation. (Brett, 1976) However, such examples can be rarely found in case of cinema. Now, let's take a closer look at the pre-revolutionary film-base of the Chinese Communist Party at Shaanxi. Among the numerous artists joining the party in its war time base, were actress Jiang Qing, director Yuan Muzhi, and his wife, actress Chen Bo'er. Yuan Muzhi later in 1949, became Communist China's first Film Bureau head and Minister of Culture. But due to shortage of film stocks and other equipment, the Shaanxi could not continue film production. Meanwhile, Japan took control of the film circuits of few important cities, and after the invasion of Manchuria in 1937, they set up a Shanghai-based industry as their propaganda machinery. In the final days of the war, while pushing the enemy back, the Lianhua Company of Shanghai re-established with the help of the Communist party and became an important hub of the leftist cultural activities in the following years (Bordwell, Thompson, 2019, p. 231-232). The films these two bases produced in this period were mainly based on the civil war with the Communists that broke out immediately after the war. To construct an indigenous 'revolutionary cinema' the state started financing a film base who were entitled to produce Socialist Realist 'worker-peasant-soldier' films for people throughout the country.

To take over the means of production, the revolutionary government of the People's Republic of China quickly nationalized film distribution and exhibition under the China Film Distribution and Exhibition Company, operating through numerous provincial and city offices. The Central Film Bureau focused on building

more theatres and video halls for the masses. Unlike the Soviet film industry's Goskino, which struggled financially, the PRC established two state bodies by 1950: the Central Film Bureau and the Film Guidance Committee. The latter, founded by Premier Zhou Enlai, addressed film ideology separately from the Film Bureau. The regulatory committee, with 35 members including Party leaders and representatives from diverse backgrounds, explicated the close link between the Party and the populace in socialist cinema. This committee was tasked with elevating the intellectual and artistic standards of national films while overseeing their development (Clark, 1987). But the newly formed government did not immediately nationalize all the film studios after the revolution, opting for a more pluralistic film culture. Private and state-owned studios, both coexisted, reflecting two institutional dynamics between the state apparatus and the party. The regime, for the time being acquired support from the urban population because, it was not ready to bear the economic burden of nationalizing the entire industry. Private studios were allowed to operate independently and were supported with loans and other facilities. In return, these studios produced films that supported government propaganda, though they dealt with a wide range of subjects. By 1951, the Shanghai Municipal Government categorized films into five divisions: national studio films, films imported from the USSR and other communist countries, and "regressive" films produced by private studios. Despite the highest production being from private studios, government reports indicated that attendance for these films was much lower compared to national studio productions and other progressive films (Pang, 2013, p. 5). The government allowed all kinds of films to be screened, letting audiences choose freely but, the Communist Party of China was successful in raising the awareness about social conditions. So, the municipality reports suggest how actively both the urban and rural audiences vehemently rejected regressive films throughout the country. By 1952, all private studios merged into the National Shanghai United Studio, accomplishing the project of nationalization and from 1949 to 1953, a unique coexistence of public and private investment can be observed in the film industry. This model influenced film governance beyond China, influencing several provincial leftist governments in South Asian countries, demonstrating, that both public and private enterprises could contribute to the film industry, to balance commercial feasibility with socially conscious cultural expression. Private investment and market forces were responsible for driving innovation, and at the same time, ensure equitable distribution of the industry's benefits. Despite its influence, this model was short-lived, as the film industry was among the first to be nationalized by China's revolutionary government.

### 5. Fidel's Cultural Harmony: Empowering Collective Consciousness in Cuba

The early growth of the Cuban film market is closely tied to the exploitation of Cuba's sugar industry by foreign interests. With a significant rural workforce engaged in

sugar production, the development of railways for sugar transportation facilitated the spread of cinema throughout the country, transitioning from temporary setups to permanent theatres. Despite widespread exhibition, ownership of cinemas was concentrated among Creole capitalists and local businessmen in Havana, who effectively marketed cinema as a popular form of entertainment. The reduction of European film production after World War I led to American distributors dominating the Cuban market, disadvantaging local production companies (Chanan, 2004, p. 44-54). In 1951, university students created "*Nuestro Tiempo*" (Our Times), a radical cultural society that merged with the Film Club of Havana to screen radical films and publish a critical cultural magazine. These film clubs played a crucial role in the revolution by organizing protests, demanding subsidies, and serving as forums for film education. During the revolution, they helped disseminate revolutionary cinema and united various pre-revolutionary art forms to mobilize against state tyranny. In 1959, the revolution triumphed, and one of its primary objectives was to develop culture 'so that it should become a true heritage of the people', as Fidel Castro puts in his *Palabras a los Intelectuales*:

*"And just as we wanted the people to have a better life materially, so is it also our wish that the people should have a better life in all its spiritual aspects. . . And just as the Revolution is concerned about the development of conditions and forces that enable the people to satisfy all its material needs, so we also wish to develop the conditions that make it possible for the people to satisfy all its cultural needs"* (Castro, 1961, cited in UNESCO Cuban Cultural Policy Report).

Immediately after coming to power, precisely just after eighty days, under Act 169, the new revolutionary government established the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematograficos (ICAIC), the Cuban Institute of Film Art and Industry, in 1959, headed by Alfredo Guevara. However, leftist film culture and practice in the rest of the continent was carried over by militant filmmakers mainly working with political groups and labour unions. Manuel Octavio Gomez, one of the first film directors of ICAIC, in an interview describes that, in the early days just after the revolution, it was almost impossible to have any kind of organized film production. The first step the revolutionary government took after coming to power was organizing the National Board of Culture, with Espinosa as the director of its film section. Espinosa took regular classes and the students assisted him and T.G. Alea in their documentaries (Burton, 1978). Aided by government subsidies, extensive foreign support and assistance from the Communist Party, the ICAIC could create their own production base, and large-scale production started from 1960s. Due to the absence of a so-called local tradition, Cuban cinema was the direct product of the revolution, and the travelling cinemas here also, proved to be the most successful in the entire process of dissemination of revolutionary cinema. In spite of the relationship with Moscow, the Cuban artists were not ready to embrace socialist realism. The members of the institute along with the cultural wing of the Communist Party debated on the nature of the revolutionary art. The

revolutionary films in the beginning, bore more resemblance to the Italian Neorealist films than Soviet socialist realism (Bordwell, Thompson, 2019, p. 612). The Constitution of Cuba as per the cultural reports, guaranteed cultural freedom of artistic expression to its utmost, provided it was not against the revolution. In 1961, few months after the invasion of Playa Giron, Castro declared in the course of his talks with the intellectuals: "*Within Revolution everything; against the Revolution nothing!*" We have seen such crisis and fear of the disintegration of the revolutionary fervour, but what makes Cuban Cultural policy unique is its promise to establish a highly creative atmosphere contributing to the advancement of all forms of cultural expression, as legitimate aspiration of the Cuban citizens, and as duty of the State and mass organizations. Such a policy is built upon the idea, that "*persons with creative abilities should develop their gifts and individuality to the full, and on the concern that the work of writers and artists should contribute to the endeavour of social and personal liberation to which socialism is committed*" (UNESCO Report, Cuban Cultural Policy; p. 21).

Cuba uniquely addressed Marx's concept of the division of labour, which suppresses inherent creativity. To liberate artists, it is necessary to resolve labour alienation and provide opportunities for artistic freedom, and the personal liberation of every individual will imbricate to a collective artistic freedom, and that will in turn spread the revolutionary consciousness throughout the country. Tzvi Medin notes that Castro and Guevara emphasized that revolutionary consciousness need not reside in the masses; a small group could initiate revolutionary action, known as the guerrilla focus theory. Guevara, in "Socialism and Man in Cuba," described the guerrilla band's role in mobilizing dormant masses and generating revolutionary enthusiasm, creating conditions for victory (Tzvi Medin, 1990, p. 6). The uniqueness of Cuba's revolution lies in Jose Marti, who acted as a lyrical bridge between the guerrilla leaders and Marxism-Leninism. Marti's ideas equated with Marxist-Leninist revolution, leading Castro to emphasize popular support and mass mobilization over orthodox state restructuring after declaring himself a Marxist-Leninist. The revolution's goal was clear from the very beginning: improve human conditions and establish a workers' democracy, replacing oppressive rule. Consequently, distinctions between the party, army, and state officials blurred, as all state machinery and citizens collaboratively worked to shape revolutionary consciousness and create a 'new human being'. In accord with Adorno and Horkheimer's theory that culture is not merely a reflection of the economy, Cuban cultural policy shaped social consciousness parallel to the socio-economic system. The ICAIC, as the cultural vanguard, focused on young filmmakers, encouraging revolutionary cinema through rigorous training. Cuban filmmakers critiqued Soviet and European models of socialist realism, and sought for new ways to represent their struggle against imperialism and neo-colonialism. It is true that class contradiction is the fundamental reality, but at such a juncture of time it was enough to be said. Class structure is not always visible, as it is uniformly defined in every sphere, and its visibility is totally dependent upon the consciousness of the masses. As, Marx, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis*

*Bonaparte* (1852) says about the small-holding peasants, that they cannot represent themselves. What they lack is the consciousness of their reality. Here, Fredric Jameson intervenes with his seminal work, *Signatures of the Visible* (1991), arguing that all reality and ideas are figurable, and to form consciousness a reality must be figurable. The Cuban filmmakers were not only trying to construct their own national cinema, but through their rigorous experimentation, they were desperately searching a path to make the reality of their struggle against imperialism and neo-colonialism figurable to form a revolutionary consciousness.

From the above three case studies, one can constitute a comprehensible idea of socialist cultural policy and a trajectory of the leftist cultural ideologue that have been shaping it and also at times critiquing it. It can be observed in all the three cases that how economic shift has impacted the respective film industries, and in spite of stringent censorship laws and undue intervention of the state machinery and the party officials into the business, or even at times, into the personal whereabouts of the artists, the statistical figures ensure that the central planning of economy has always been beneficial for both the film industry and the dissemination networks. In Russia, the Communist Party, as the proletariat's vanguard, established institutions under the People's Commissariat of Education and Enlightenment to create a proletarian culture that would become a universal praxis for workers globally in a classless society. The party defined cultural policy principles, while state bodies implemented these policies and oversaw cultural development, showcasing collaboration between government bodies, institutions, cultural branches, and mass organizations. However, Lunacharsky's ideas on preserving pre-revolutionary art forms and multiformity, reflected in Soviet cultural policy which eventually led to economic issues during the civil war and under War Communism. Lenin was prompted to annul Proletkult and expel artists, who were not of proletariat origins (Kay, 1983). China, led by Mao, focused on local class struggles, differing from many of his contemporaries and Nationalist allies. Mao believed artistic production should be controlled by the masses and, unlike the Soviet focus on specialized art education, the CPC encouraged the workers and the artists to carry on their experimentations. As most artists contributed to the surplus social product, there was no such burden on the state budget. They diverged from the Soviet Gosplan model, centring the film industry around the Central Film Bureau and the Film Guidance Committee, which included party members, leaders, and laymen to reflect the party-audience connection. Cuba offered a unique interpretation of Marxist-Leninist principles, emphasizing direct engagement with the broader population. This approach aimed to resolve labour alienation and promote artistic freedom, blurring distinctions between state officials, party members, the military, and citizens. The Cuban revolution sought to improve human conditions and establish a workers' democracy, fostering revolutionary consciousness and creating a 'new human being'. Cuban film policy extended beyond conventional norms, viewing

cinema as a guerrilla warfare tool to make the reality of their struggle figurable, shaping revolutionary consciousness. This commitment led to rigorous experimentation and innovation, elevating Cuban documentaries as an ultimate model for leftist filmmaking globally.

## 6. A Question in Lieu of Conclusion: West Bengal in the 1970s, Towards a Leftist Film Policy?

The 1960s turned out to be a turbulent decade for socialist nations in the face of the American imperialism. Numerous left-radical movements started cropping up throughout the world, but questions of class remained notably unaddressed through them. Noteworthy events include the victory of SDS in UC Berkeley, the Black Panther movement, the Anti-Vietnam war movement in England, the Maoist JVP movement in Sri Lanka, the Naxalbari movement in India, the Cultural Revolution in China, and the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia. Though these movements were radical and anti-authoritarian in nature, class contradiction was no more in the centre of the revolutionary rhetoric. Despite their left inclination, class did not play any role in fostering solidarity, and inherently, gender, race, and sexism slogans and demands were not subversive. These radical movements were co-optable and could be easily subsumed by the state or capitalism. Moreover, since the late 1960s, the US, along with its allies, has been invading and undermining erstwhile Third World countries. Next to the Latin American countries, Korea and Vietnam stand as primary instances where the US has imposed numerous restrictions since the Second World War. Surprisingly, all of these happened during the era of peaceful coexistence between the West and East blocs. This reminds us of Che Guevara's speech in the Tricontinental, where he states, that peaceful coexistence with the imperialists is never possible. He accuses the leading nations of the Eastern bloc, the Soviet and China, who for their internal dissensions, refrained from any direct conflict with the imperialists and neo-colonialists. As a result, smaller socialist nations such as, Vietnam, Cuba, Chile and others had to grapple with the ferocious forces of imperialism without any support from the superpowers. Thus, taking the path of accessible entertainment and popularity by the superpowers, as seen in the USSR since 1950s and during the shift of economic policy in China in the early 1960s and late 70s, in the end destroyed the notion of people's cinema or national revolutionary cinema that had been gradually surpassing the boundaries of the nation-state to influence oppressed people in the rest of the world. In the aftermath of numerous military coups and the deaths of leaders like Salvador Allende and Che Guevara, Latin American countries gradually emerged as the breeding ground for the rise of neoliberalism. On the other hand, Thatcherism's 'regressive modernization' project worsened the crisis of the left. This shift reflected in their cultural policies, where, the envisioned model of 'people's cinema' project gradually began to transform into more accessible entertainment aimed at a broader audience. But, the gradual blurring of class distinctions and class questions in the film texts was alarming for the communist nations because we have seen

how the state and neoliberal capitalism can easily subsume and co-opt any other contradictions. The impact of international collaborations on Cuba was similar, leading to the gradual erosion of their socialist fervour and creativity to continue their model of revolutionary filmmaking. While remnants persisted in the work of select individuals or groups, the overarching concept that had been the cornerstone of leftist cultural policies ceased to exist.

Within this historical context, the Left Front came to power in the state of West Bengal within the Indian federal structure. From its very onset, the government was keen on developing a refined film culture, and its ascension to power coincided with the Indian New Wave in the late 1970s. Even before the formation of West Bengal Film Development Corporation (WBFDC), the government started producing films directly like *Ganadebata* (1979) by Tarun Majumdar, *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (1979) by Satyajit Ray, and *Parashuram* (1980) by Mrinal Sen. The West Bengal Colour Film and Sound Laboratory, previously an independent body, was taken under the government and converted to the West Bengal Film Development Corporation Limited (WBFDC), which started functioning since 1983, and has produced numerous films that have received critical acclamation and accolades from the Central Government and the international festival circuits as well. Many theorists and historians have argued that these films have failed to reach their target audience and that was mainly due to the lack of proper distribution and exhibition networks and infrastructure, and the dominance of the Bengali urban educated middle-class “Bhadralok” sensibilities in the field of art and culture during the left regime. But there are a few more things we need to look into. So far, it is clear to us, that it is not possible to observe the left in isolation based on any particular region and time frame. Similarly, if we monitor the efforts and activities endorsed by the Left Front Government of West Bengal on this basis, one can observe that their cultural activities, especially cinema was largely overshadowed by the Indian federal structure and its diplomatic manoeuvres. The spirit and fervour of global left solidarity, that can be observed in the government supported or sponsored art forms were quintessentially one-sided, because we all know the Indian state has maintained both political and cultural ties with the Soviet Union since 1950s. However, Hindi popular commercial films from India were hugely popular throughout East Europe, and films from West Bengal or other states like Kerala or Tripura which have been ruled by leftist parties for a considerable period, could not acquire a place in the *Indiyskie Filmi* (Indian Film) section of the USSR. Although some collaborations, or exchanges can be seen in case of literature and theatre, but the Soviets mainly preferred the Bombay industry films and instances of co-productions like *Ajooba* (1990) and *Alibaba Aur 40 Chor* (1980) are quite popular in both the countries. The relations with China were limited to political activities only, and they were never quite interested in any cultural convergence or exchanges. However, many Latin American filmmakers came to Calcutta since the late 70s, and their interaction with the Bengali film artists and activists had a huge impact on the parallel filmmaking practice in the

state, and behind that, the government and its affiliated film festival played an important role. Even that was not enduring enough as we have seen through this article how the model of government sponsored people’s cinema was gradually declining due to the broader geopolitical scenario, internal dissensions within the socialist powers, and the neoliberal capital surreptitiously creeping into the film industries swaying people away from the realities and converting them into potent consumers.

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