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## CHOTEOS AND MEMES:

### IRREVERENCES TO POWER FROM THE CUBAN THOUGHT

#### CHOTEOS Y MEMES: IRREVERENCIAS AL PODER DESDE EL PENSAMIENTO CUBANO

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this work is to assess the mark that choteo and memes have left in Cuban popular culture as one of the most legitimate forms of resistance and criticism of the Cuban political and social status for more than 100 years. Analysis of the thought of important figures of our political saints, and the meaning of a current form of protest such as the meme, will bring us closer to drawing, distinctive features of an identity that moves in the subjective approach.

### Keywords:

Meme, thought, imaginary, culture.

## RESUMEN

El objetivo del presente trabajo consiste en valorar la huella que han dejado en la cultura popular cubano el choteo y los memes como una de las formas más legítimas de resistencia y crítica al status político y social cubano desde hace más de 100 años. Análisis del pensamiento de importantes figuras de nuestro santoral político, y el significado de una forma actual de protesta como el meme, nos acercarán a dibujar, rasgos distintivos de una identidad que se mueve en el plano de lo subjetivo.

### Palabras clave:

Meme, pensamiento, imaginario, cultura.

## INTRODUCTION

The Cuban nation has been going through a very difficult economic, political, cultural, and ideological context in recent years, recently exacerbated by a set of causal and coincidental events – the result of the unfortunate connection of internal and external blockades that mutually attempt to make our lives complicated–, which invite us to an accurate reflection of the Cuban, so that together, among all of us, try to get out of the dilemma (Sarmiento, 2016; Suárez, 2018).

Thinking about the various reactions of the people to first understand if it is possible, and then faces their sad reality, both intimate and social; we cannot ignore the legacy of great intellectuals who for more than 100 years formulated sociological diagnoses about their country and possible solutions.

The objective of this research is to assess the convenience and contemporaneity of nationalist thinkers as Mario Guiral Moreno, Carlos de Velazco, José Sixto de Sola, Jorge Mañach Robato, among others, by establishing integrities and shortcomings of the Cubans as a social corpus, moral, civic and spiritual and, in turn, to elaborate like few others, to those eminent Cuban intellectuals their theoretical contributions that allow us to understand what we have been, what we are and what we will continue to be, regardless of the solution we give to our problems: Cubans.

At the same time, we establish the ideological and cultural coordinates on the part of the current alternative forms of irreverence, which, like memes, present such a protest that brings us closer to drawing distinctive features of an identity that moves in the subjective plain.

In this sense, in the difficult moments that the nation is experiencing today, the personality of Cubans, above all, the simple Cuban, the humble, the worldview of the reality that surrounds him, his unchanging ability to react to the problems they face invite us to a serious and unprejudiced reading of the aforementioned intellectuals, because the choteo and its grandchildren, in this case, the memes, have become obligatory weapons of a large part of the country's social conglomerate for their civic, noble, in some cases grotesque responses, but in others, an expression of sadness that emerges from reality.

Before going fully into the analysis of choteo and “memes”, or “memes-choteos” as we want to define it, it is good to clarify that today they circulate, the essential “memes-jokes” through the networks in all and from all possible directions. All ideological and spiritual tendencies have turned to them to illustrate their anger, their longing, their political views, their reasons or not, their questions and their idolatry.

And they do it by resorting to any necessary subterfuge in their way of criticizing, demonstrating, offending and demanding any issue. However, the “meme-choteo” does not come from anywhere, if it does so in a mocking, degrading, and irresponsible way, although by tendency, it is what almost everyone follows, it is not properly ethical.

## DEVELOPMENT

Deeping into the virtues and defects of governance and political power in Cuba has been the task or concern of the most famous intellectuals of our nation, as well as of the popular imagination itself where choteo, mockery, and satire have been at the center of the debate. From both dimensions, that is, from the academic intellectuals, as well as from the popular imaginary, values are distinguished, but at the same time that attempts are made to correct attitudes that supposedly put us far from the values of the nations that we think are the “most civilized ones”.

According to Trujillo (2019), “*enlightened positivists, neo-Thomists, irrationalists, Marxists, patriots or politicians, ex officio, have contributed their intellectual worldview in relation to the elements that they consider to be Cuban identities*”: (p. 128) For this Cuban philosopher and professor, from Arango y Parreño to Ramiro Guerra, the virtues and shortcomings of Cubans were investigated, a topic that was privileged, and is privileged even depending on the political, economic or ideocultural context. On the other hand, no great Cuban who has reached key positions in the political administration of this island from colonial times to the present day has escaped learned elucidation or the popular imagination that censures or praises his performance.

In this way, José Antonio Saco in 1832 insisted on the tendency to laziness or other vices of those born here, preferably blacks people and the popular sectors, at the same time they objected to the Spanish colonial power for consenting it. While José Martí or Calixto García denounced angrily the slander and defamations that was spread from Spain and the United States about the capacities of Cubans for self-government. The *Vindication of Cuba*, by Martí, immaculate, very Cuban, and García's protest letter to Shafter are famous as acts of patriotic reaffirmation at the end of the 19th century.

But in the emergence and evolution of choteo and mockery as a means of irreverence to political power, the shortages in the structuring of our republican order from 1902 played an essential role. This political process required corrections to the historical deformations that were accumulating in the foundation of the profile of the Cuban. Overcoming the weakness of the republican structures and gradually dispensing with the dependence and guidance of the American “tutor” became a transcendental challenge not only for politicians but also for the

ideologues of independence in its various forms; at the same time, both overruns became on issues of criticism and satire from various angles of public opinion.

But before analyzing two of the authors who came closest to choteo and mockery from the intellectual springs of the bourgeois Republic, such as the books by Fernando Ortiz, *Entre cubanos. Tropical Psychology* (1911), and above all, *Cuban Decadence* (1924), which are evident antecedents of Guiral Moreno's and Jorge Mañach's meditations on choteo. Choteo and mockery appear in one way or another in the Cuban imagination and prose, as well as in his predominant historicist perspective. It is axiomatic; however, that Mañach did not renew his phenomenological points of view with the implementation of the postulates presented into this philosophical school by the Frenchman Maurice Merleau-Ponty from his book *Phenomenology of Perception* of 1945, in which the body of the subject becomes the axis of his presence in the world.

In this way, one of the authors who support the theoretical bases of the stealthy protest of Cubans and their response to reality is Mario Guiral Moreno, who, in 1914, when referring to the social subject who suffers, the one he carries on his back the weight of that mockery, especially that great mass that still exists:

*"It is not often that to find a Cuban whose heart is open to hope, whose mind is predisposed to optimism. Ask the young man, the mature man, the old man, his opinion on the general state of the country, or on the progress of its business and interests, and as a rule, you will be satisfied that the situation is bad, that serious cataclysms threaten us, great misfortunes, that everything is paralyzed and the horizon is presented with gloomy characters. Even the popular Cuban songs reflect bitterness; they carry a seal of sadness and are impregnated with certain melancholy"* (Guiral, 1914, pp. 128-129)

There are plenty of analyzes. It not only reveals the context of 1914, but also that of 1929-1933, that of the forties and fifties. That point of view could also have been written among 1965-1968, in the 1970s at the height of the special period throughout almost the entire 1990s and it has increased in recent years. Imagine yourself, creator of the "meme-choteo", how many contexts you can reveal.

The crux of the matter, it seems, is not to argue with the attitude of the people, but to question the reasons that cause this attitude, that spirit, that sadness. You cannot be optimistic if you have in front of you a reality with a world of comfort and well-being for few, and that excludes the majority of those enjoyments, but also, you confine the simple and elementary right to express an opinion, to challenge the exclusion and the discontent in the spaces that exonerate, and not only in those that are covered up.

And that was lived in Cuba, not only in 1914, but in 1929-1933, in the forties, in the fifties, and at various times after 1959. For this reason, on occasions it becomes somewhat sterile, the childish comparison of that before and after 1959, of course, for some aspects of life, you don't have to be naive either. In these comparisons it must be kept in mind that the people are a socio-historical category.

In any case, Guiral Moreno's critique focused on the marked and recurring presumption in the Cuban population of the first two decades of the Republican era, which as a result, conditioned the existence in those circumstances of a social memory limited by frustration, strictly epochal, beyond the time of delirium for the new: the Republic. The symbiosis of these factors enriched the trend towards choteo in the academic and popular imagination.

*"Cultural centers, societies for literary purposes, recreational sites... enjoy unlimited popular favor among us, during the time it takes to chotearse, or be choteado; and the latter is almost inevitable in a town, which, like ours, has a sense of ridicule more developed than others"*. (Guiral, 1914, p. 130)

And it is that, after a century, our excessive enthusiasm for the outside, for the foreign, for the strange, that almost pusillanimous foreignness that typifies us in terms of relations with the great supremacies at a certain imaginaries levels, who do not hide their perception that without US or Soviet-Russian aid in the last hundred years, there is no progress for Cuba.

On the other hand, choteo, a category developed by our intellectual, Jorge Mañach, is an unfortunate psychosocial phenomenon, proof of the futility of the character of being Cuban in the early republican years, evidence of the imbalance of his sociability (Mañach, 1938). An example used by the nationalist thinker is the slave Francisco Landaluze, a character who kisses the sculpture of the white lady, and is also shown as an independent subject who throws a trumpet at a public speaker and who must change *"with the gradual advent of our maturity, with the gradual alteration of our social environment"*. (Mañach, 1938, p. 3)

Therefore, choteo is the essential feature of satire in the Cuban imaginary. In this way, it constitutes a mental attitude, a personality trait and a habit of disrespect that is made explicit through mockery and whose objective is to oppose to all order, hierarchy, authority or power. The systematization of this habit of not taking anything seriously implies an affirmation of the self on the part of the most oppressed in society, thinks, which see in the practice of this desacralizing exercise a sign of Independence.

The emancipation of the social being that enunciates the ridicule of the choteo can be synthesized in an aspiration not to be bothered by another subject, both a sign

of authority and a target of ridicule. For Mañach (1938), “*someone has said that the ideal of the Spaniards can be expressed with that traditional phrase: do what you really want.*” Therefore, he summarizes a conception of the personality of Cubans by saying that perhaps we have inherited that spirit from Hispanics, but that in Cubans it is less disturbing.” (p. 9)

Choteo is finally for Mañach (1938), an analogue of roughness, laziness, impredemption and tropical sensuality. Although *Indagación al choteo* has basically been considered an essay in social psychology, its author does not limit himself to describing the anomalous but also speculates about the causes of this satire which are, according to him, the insular nature and History “*must be affirmed that there are peculiar features in the Cuban idiosyncrasy that, sometimes originated and accused by the environment or by the social circumstances in which we have been developing, tend to facilitate that perversion of mockery that we call choteo*”. (p. 12)

From this perspective, History is for Mañach above all a history of the spirit, the precursor of a succession of styles that organize the expression of such breath. It is the immaturity of the Cuban republic and the youth of its independence, which facilitates, according to him, the conditions for the ignominy of sarcasm in its choteo version. This immaturity Mañach resembles, from the historical point of view, with the withdrawal of serious collective challenges.

We will continue this analysis with a reflection on the presence or not of choteo as a variant of satire, in some strips of the most recent Cuban literature and art. In a book on the history of Cuba that looks more like a guide for tourists, the Cuban speleologist and Captain Antonio Núñez Jiménez writes in a Castilian of doubtful quality, about Mañach and the choteo:

*“Mañach, with the limitation that his position of bourgeois class, ultimately at the service of capitalism and its support, skirts some of the social and political essences of the choteo, but it does not manage to unravel the explanation of its true scope... In reality the choteo was systematically expanded against the social order established here, that is, against bourgeois society and the proof of this is how the choteo ends as the ideas of Marxism-Leninism gradually replace, from the 1930s, that weapon of the people. Faced with the heroic drama of Moncada, Granma and the guerrilla struggle in the Sierra Maestra, the Cuban does not chotea. In Girón the choteo is already a fossil element of Cuban sociology”.* (Núñez Jiménez, 1984, p. 67)

This antithesis is imprudent: both Mañach and an ideologue of revolutionary power agree in opposition to choteo, the first from an enlightened Ortegian elitism, the second from a rustic Marxist orthodoxy. Even assuming that this opinion of Núñez Jiménez has become moldy — the book in question dates from 1984 —, and that the author’s

lack of intellectual qualities invalidates the value of what appears in it, time and facts prove that neither Mañach nor the choteo have had a good bibliographical acceptance in Cuban Marxist historiography, at least until the beginning of the 21st century.

I advance two judgments: Mañach for being a thinker who was renegade for a long time and excluded from the analyzes in the historiographical and literary order, and the choteo for being based on the mockery of authority and order, for the sensation of free will that would always accompany him. This does not mean, of course, that the influence of Mañach’s thought among the youngest Cuban intellectuals does not exist, nor that choteo has ceased to be the most representative form of satire in the Cuban.

If we follow Mañach and limit ourselves phenomenologically to the facts themselves, that is, in the case of the artistic imaginary, to literature and art, and in the case of the second, to language and an oral genre that is very much in vogue in Cuba, the joke: we have to recognize that satire in the form of choteo has not only not eclipsed Cuban sociability and art inside and outside the island, but has also become a typical form of expression. The omnipresent authority and the desire for freedom, understood as a rupture of an imposed order, are the targets of this satire.

Now, even though the policies of the governments that emerged from the 1959 Revolution received fertile ground to encourage certain egalitarian policies under which millions of Cubans lived and survived until some 30 years ago (1992), the puerile bureaucratization of the Cuban model has bothered the Cuban people, by the pretension of the bureaucrats’ elevation, not because of the visible and laughable and amoral damage that they have done to the credibility of the revolutionary project, but because of the arrogance and the lack of real dialogue with the social subjects that suffer the exclusions.

There is nothing more that bothers Cubans, that someone believes that they are above others, that draws popular anger with the energy that does not always manage to raise the inoperability of most of the management that advocates or pretends to advocate state ownership: this is perhaps the worst of evils or the main obstacle to the participation of the people in decision-making and in the implementation of an authentic and efficient socialist model of society, which today is far from the collective imagination of the nation, and that it is the favorite target of the new forms of irreverence and choteo: memes.

The meme is then, or what is the same, an internet meme, it is that conception, which through a feeling, expresses in the virtual media static and moving images, animated in videos, songs, audios, which is massively replicated by social networks. Due to its impact, it is something that goes viral, especially on the networks. Its origin is due to Dawkins (1976), when in his text *the selfish gene; he*

coined the meme as “theoretical unit of cultural information that is transmitted from one individual to another”. (p.192). This zoologist and researcher expose the idea that the meme is the mimic unit of information that can be transmitted.

Generally, it is something of a comic nature, a funny situation that can be related to an important event that happened in reality, or something that happened on the network of networks. Once it happens, the succession of memes appears almost instantly due to the imagination and inventive power of the user community, always ready to reflect their opinion, humorous or not, on anything.

Internet memes can be kept unchanged or develop over time, either by chance, or by reproduction, caricature or by adding new content. These images, or videos, or texts emerge as a form of social interaction, as cultural references or as a way of describing people’s real life situations. The speed with which they can spread globally and their social impact has attracted the interest of researchers and professionals in the communication industry.

From a conceptual representation, the meme constitutes a category built from axioms that, as we have already pointed out, are not entirely consistent with each other. Although there is a more or less accepted idea that defines them, it is a phenomenon that, due to its transdisciplinary nature, has been approached and worked on in multiple ways. In the same way, the taxonomies found in relation to the meme on the Internet present types and classes in which different terms are used to refer to similar notions.

It is, then, a generality that continues to be elaborated, and that especially in relation to online memes, surely due to their relative novelty, requires approximations and studies that in the future provide a much more solid conceptual framework.

We could end this work with some example of the current popular or academic challenges that are sent to political power in the form of a mockery of political power by the Facebook “memestery” or by intimate WhatsApp groups, there are thousands of alternatives, which, from those platforms they make up an imaginary of rejection of ineffectiveness or of what is considered administrative mismanagement, but nothing better, to end, than illustrating a pressing meditation on current Cuban choteo, than telling a story about “Pepito”, undoubtedly the character of the most popular mentioned story in Cuba. By trying to censure or ignore the authoritarian voice of the official discourse, the best example of choteo in recent decades, in the interior of Cuba, ended up being almost mute, that is, he chose low-voice orality, whispering, lack of written proof for fear of denunciation (Valdés, 2018, p. 61).

It is a thoughtless Pepito who best symbolizes it. Pepito is a child who, as a child, says what he thinks without reflecting and what he thinks and says amounts, almost always, to a comment on what is happening at that moment in the country. One day, says the popular voice, Pepito’s teacher wants to evaluate the political culture of her students in front of an inspector who comes to visit her. For this he shows the children a portrait of Donald Trump and asks them if they know who he is. No student responds and in such a situation she only manages to give a few clues: “Because of that man we are blocked, we go hungry; we don’t have electricity all day.” Pepito interrupts her to help her in front of the inspector and yells: — Teacher, I already know who he is, what happens is that like he is in the photo, without the latest model check shirts, I don’t recognize him.

A study of the forms that satirical humor adopts in the contemporary Cuban imaginary, would admit to better establishing the continuity or the break with the postulates of Mañach and his *Indagación del choteo* and, above all, to specify the possible existence of a typology of satire in Cuban art and society with many facts in common with the choteo that Mañach described.

## CONCLUSIONS

When the nation is founded on a self-sufficient discourse and a furious presumptuous optimism, the great popular masses, ordinary people, the humble, at the level of common sense or emotional, object, challenge, disagree, and try to validate a feeling contrary to power. Only, and this can be debatable, those modern, thriving, developed, in constant and visible growth, or really satisfied societies raise an optimistic banner as an attitude of life. With this, we are not against optimism; simply that speaking on optimistic grounds in difficult contexts could become a boomerang and acts of demagogic simplicity.

Choteo a century ago and memes in the last decade have saved us as a people from the indifference of power. However, both subjective positions have limited our possibilities for cultural and civic growth. In both cases, disappointment as criticism has led us to immoralities without arguments. Choteo and meme, or meme-choteo should not remain forever an attitude of our social mentality against what bothers our individual freedom.

As individuals and citizens we must learn to grow from other forms of ideological symbolization of defense of rights, we must not settle for a simple “it’s ok with me if I don’t get bothered”, the frustration of the annoyance must be demanded as an interpersonal or macro social relationship, and for this, it is necessary to recognize the discipline as ordering of the law, and the democratically elected and socially supervised power as an instrument to restrain indolence and guarantee for the discipline itself.

Respect for difference must be the first condition for the construction of future civility, in a society that is still far from overcoming the mental class structure of authoritarianism, even when we feel the social and individual need for hierarchies and power structures.

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