

# Cuba and the Road to Modernity

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For a long time now, many of us Cubans have habitually blamed the island's governing sociopolitical system for all of the country's problems. Yet, the situation is actually much more complex. In any event, this system is, above all, the offspring of Cuban society and culture or, at most, a possibility accepted and created by them. There is a mindset socially disposed to this, which has served to institutionalize and sweeten the pill of Marxist-Leninism. *Criollo* socialism is not the father, but the son of a culture that urgently needs to remove any passive or active obstacle that keeps it from achieving modernity, despite its undeniable virtues.

The obstacles? Negative cultural traits that have plagued us since colonial times. While the following enumeration is not exhaustive, from among them it is imperative to name intolerance, pretentious nationalism,

and a sense of victimhood that leads to irresponsibility.

*Ultra-nationalism, intolerance and victimhood: three models to dismantle*

Culturally speaking, Cubans have been instilled with a sense that everything having to do with them is superior, incomparable, and that the rest is expendable or non-essential. This stems from a nationalism that is lauded from all possible places: school, home, the movies, television, etc. Thus, from childhood on, Cubans grow up programmed to believe in their alleged superiority. They have been told that there is no sky bluer than "their" sky; that Varadero is the best beach in the world; that their national anthem is the most beautiful of all—as well as their flag, and their women,

and their songs, and even their political system.

In Cuba, anything that is “other” is foreign (beyond, of course, anything practical or temporary, or any exceptions that confirm the rule), because the dominant culture has caused Cubans to believe that they are “the most,” as the lyrics of a popular song affirm. Any rapprochement with someone who is different is personally often taken as a sign of weakness and, in extreme instances, even as ignorance, when it is precisely the opposite, because it is occurring in an sociopolitical environment of mutual mistrust. This is the reason Cuba has developed a culture of confrontation and intolerance that in the past fifty years has grown in intensity.

Intolerance is no less powerful than this recalcitrant brand of nationalism. Or, perhaps it is an offshoot of it. An ultra-nationalist mindset that might also underesteem “others” does not encourage curiosity, rapprochement, or acceptance of difference to take root. It takes maturity to be respectfully curious about something or someone. It requires that the very best within us engage in discovering and acknowledging whatever is foreign, or different. This is why genuine curiosity, and not meddling, is intimately linked with tolerance, a value without which no true democracy can function.

It is also the case that, organically, ultra-nationalism serves as an ideal breeding ground for the kind of irresponsibility a sense of victimhood encourages. Because we are a heroic, hard-working, irreproachable people, that is superior; it is impossible, in other words, to understand underdevelopment, poverty, or even the absence of certain basic freedoms as anything but the result of the “others,” or the aggression of someone different. It is the “other” who is responsible for these things. The “other” who either occultly or openly

works to impede our progress. It bears repeating that this is a serious problem that goes beyond the current political model in Cuba.

Victimhood is in vogue on the island, and in a large part of Latin America, and it is intimately tied to irresponsibility—an irresponsibility that is often as profound as the ocean is deep. The recent events in Honduras, and the response that U.S. President Barack Obama made to several regional leaders, perfectly exemplifies the problem, as we shall see below.

In response to criticism from leaders like Raúl Castro or Hugo Chávez, who suggested that Washington should actively intervene in the crisis that followed the expulsion of Honduran President Manuel Zelaya, Obama proclaimed:

“The same critics who say that the United States has not intervened enough in Honduras are the same people who say that we’re always intervening, and the Yankees need to get out of Latin America. You can’t have it both ways. If these critics think that it’s appropriate for us to suddenly act in ways that in every other context they consider inappropriate, then I think what that indicates is that maybe there’s some hypocrisy involved in their approach to U.S.-Latin American relations that certainly is not going to guide my Administration’s policies.”

### *Towards Modern Citizenship*

So, do you get rid of obstacles as rooted as ultra-nationalism, intolerance, and justifying victimhood in a not too distant future? Probably, via the educational system, creating class, curricula, and teaching strategies aimed at spreading those values that are compatible with modernity, and by concomitantly discouraging cultural shortcomings like the aforementioned ones that prevent our national development.

Unlike what some educators have praise-fully called a “collective or social citizenry,” our future educational system should promote a responsible, unbiased, and tolerant citizenry. It should be active and independent.

For a society to be efficient and developed, each of its members must be efficient and developed. Moreover, for a society to be solidarious, it obviously must have something for which to be solidarious about: it should first be comprised of individuals capable of espousing the criteria necessary for fostering solidarity. This means that in order create a developed, tolerant, and solidarious society, we must first design an educational system capable of shaping responsible, tolerant, and productive individuals.

Future Cuban schools should contribute decisively to the advent of a responsible citizenry that is economically independent and culturally open to all manner of influences. As

Slovak pedagogue Zuzana Humajová says: “Schools must prepare pupils and students for a practical life, for a continuous education and for their successful entry into the workforce. Education should instill in students the ability to understand the world, the ability to know how to express themselves orally and in writing, to read and understand, to know how to seek and utilize information, the ability to think critically, solve problems creatively, do teamwork, assume responsibility, respect human ethical values, and individual’s natural rights.”

Furthermore, education should shape people who can be an active citizenry, immunizing them against intolerance, pretentious nationalism, and a sense of victimhood that leads to irresponsibility.