

CUBA:

Intolerance *versus* Nation

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The essay “Los futuros de la isla”¹ [The Island’s Futures], published in 2006, set forth the curious idea that there was no essential text on the subject of intolerance in Cuba—a country practically the result of intellectual invention. We have books on poetics, ethics, civics, politics, and economics, all of them essential to the island, but we have no literature or project at all—not even a bad one—or one that doesn’t live up to twenty-first century standards—that uses multiple races as a point of departure to talk about coexistence in a diverse society.

Cuba’s founding letters follow four basic lines of thought: the homeland’s creation, which is not the same as the nation’s; the creation of a *civis*, more along pedagogical lines than along those of a citizenry; its economic structure, which resulted when the founding era’s science was put to work for the nation’s economic project; and the poetic imagination, which associated history, Catholicism,

and a bit of scholastic philosophy, in its continuous search for a national essence, in order to establish (or not establish) a Cuban essence and aristocracy capable of continuously reinventing itself through any and all instances of rebellion or war. At the very core of things were *Patria*, warrior-patricians, economists, and poets; it was they and their fundamental concerns that invented Cuba between the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries.

In the eighteenth century, the ethical question took center stage for Father Félix Varela, but his perspective lacked the minute theological precision required for truly religious-cultural reflection—one that might have facilitated a more or less accurate, contextualized evaluation of the country that was being invented. Besides, it would have been better for civil society to take up the ethical issue, because this surely would have made possible an intellectual discussion on

the subject of tolerance in so ferociously modern a country where diversity defines its core. Civil society sees citizens as something more than just people who have to serve their nation.

Perhaps this lack of a philosophical position beyond that of the white Cuban elite's explains why Cuba lacked a metaphysics of its own reflective of our obvious multiple origins—roots that would have provided a shared worldview born of acknowledged diversity and our own particular context. That is why Cuban Catholicism, in its unconvincing break with Spain (a break it thought was greater than it actually was), was limited in its contribution to the creation of an incipient new homeland. It was not able to commit itself to seeing the full nation-building project to complete fruition.

White Catholic men, the elites who wrote Cuba's foundational texts, could not conceive of *other*, possibly competing worldviews *in the country they were inventing* (Deist José Martí is a notable exception). The possible new nation that came into being was dogmatically intolerant and closed to the consequences of the Protestant Reformation. Cultural intolerance rendered it incapable of seeing the true social reality of its contours—the only reality that could have resulted from the racial confusion of the independence wars, a busy cultural *mélange* that never managed to reflect the true events of Cuban history, and a resolution and mindset quite unaffected by the frequent ideas, attacks, and poetic rantings that take hold among Cuba's elites from time to time. This double intolerance has allowed Cuba to be a country—more or less, but it has kept it from being a true nation.

The Sociedad Económica Amigos del País [Economic Society of Friends of the

Country], a highly significant institution created in the nineteenth century, provided no space whatsoever for a cultural and intellectual evaluation that might have provided a good interpretation of our socio-cultural state—one that went beyond the country's technical, economic, moral, political and religious realities. So it was that the Cuban imaginary always excluded more than half of its truly constitutive elements.

Of course, modern nations could not have come about without religious and cultural tolerance. England would have faced serious problems in becoming a nation if not for Anglicanism. The same can be said about Holland, Germany, and other Europeans, had they not undergone the Protestant Reformation. It is impossible to get diverse, different peoples—with differing worldviews—to coexist under the weight of an inflexible religious philosophy. This is even truer in places where the boundaries of religion—how humans deal with their most important concerns—and a community's popular culture—how people live their daily lives, overlap, making the limits of one and/or the other unclear.

This last reason—a lack of cultural tolerance, that is, a lack of respect for the elements that contribute to the coexistence of specific communities independent of their particular worldview—is what makes the building of a modern nation impossible. If force is used in an attempt to create coexistence—through religious and cultural intolerance—what results may be a state, but it is not a nation.

John Locke of England, Voltaire of France, and Erasmus of Rotterdam (in Holland), all clearly realized that without tolerance their societies would crumble. Perhaps France is the most notable example of a tolerant nation, because only the French

Revolution's concept of 'citizen' made possible the definitive joining of what Mirabeau called an "unconstituted conglomerate of peoples" that together survived under the ostentatious weight of the French monarchy's feudal traditions.

Modern nations are modern only because they base themselves on religious and cultural tolerance. There is only one exception to this rule; it can be found on every continent and in a wide diversity of cultures. This goes a bit beyond the highly differentiated development one finds in modern societies, with the normal multiplicity of views and interests of their inhabitants, who must practice tolerance if they are to peacefully coexist in one common space with one language. Instead, it has more to do with two involuntary elements that constitute all the nations invented in the West: their constitutive plurality, which results necessarily in cultural tolerance; and the nation's modernity, which bases its own national construction on the basic, fundamental right of equality for all within the republic. In Cuba, this dual burden weighs like a double albatross on any attempt to build a nation. Only when Cuba is open to these two forms of tolerance will this burden allow her to be a true nation. It is fascinating to see how rich the eighteenth century was in treatises and writs calling for tolerance in places like France, England, and Holland that were at least outwardly modern in some way. In nations like Spain (where democracy currently unleashes the multiple nationalisms that were earlier forced to live with a nation-state), which attempted modernity without having the very necessary attending debate about tolerance, the body politic of the nation has been either problematic or volatile, as in the case of the former Yugoslavia or Soviet Union, to name just a few of the best known examples. During

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, lacking an European-style aristocratic lineage based on land ownership and sovereign power (disguised as divine mandate), Cuba was coming into being as a modern society while also trying to be a modern nation built on historical diversity—like pluralistic Spain, Africa, and China—and unlike Europe, where diversity might arise from one single root, cultural environment, or similar level of technological development.

Thus, tolerance in Cuba required much more than just a philosophical-religious treatise; it needed, in addition, a cultural treatise that promoted the incorporation of those *others*—who in their entirety were more than half the country's population—into a process. This process is essential because it has to do not only with those who differ from the power elite trying to avoid incarceration or expulsion, but also because it compromises the completion of a project of coexistence which having started out badly has not yet been corrected. The Cuban nation-building project will continue to self-destruct so long as this level of incorporation into the project itself is not achieved. This smug and self-destructive tendency survives because certain people believe the compensatory idea that nation building is an ongoing and never completed process—a fallacy that is belied by the very existence of states.

It is, of course, a complex matter. The idea is, then, that Cuba is a nation...in a continuous state of becoming, a concept I believe is sustained by two misunderstandings—that a state and nation, and ethnic integration and nation-building are one and the same thing. The first error is culturally relevant but has an immediate political connotation and relates to the issue of ideological intolerance. The second error is more

important, both from a sociological or cultural point of view, and relates directly to cultural intolerance. In my opinion, this tendency to confuse aesthetic incorporation with national integration stems from an ethnographic fallacy set forth by Fernando Ortiz. Actually, it is not so much Fernando Ortiz—who is justifiably heralded as our third discoverer, after Christopher Columbus and Alexander von Humboldt—but the intellectual tradition that was born of his magnificent work. The relationship between them is akin to that of Machiavelli and Machiavelism.

The source of this ethnographic falsehood is a limited view of Cuba's African heritage, seen, as it is, from ethnic artifacts, messages communicated by danceable rituals, and religious beings and meanings linked to the practice of rituals and sacrifices. Prejudice against pagan and primitive practices shapes the way in which these *danceable* African religions, with their intimate link to nature's life cycles, are seen. In the Ortiz tradition, the untranslatability of many of these rituals and of an idiom that serves not the purpose of social communication but of the transmission of rituals rules and intentions, places greater importance on these external elements—dress, sacrifice, dance, and the unintelligibility of certain codes understood only by initiates. It is a language of cultural and not social initiation. Its role is to adorn poetic and musical lyricism, not explain socializing processes in a community, school, or work. Thus, as an idiom derived from African languages, it is basic to the reproduction of a society and cannot be reduced or transferred to a *tecnos*, or to what is even worse in the Cuban tradition: a debatable metaphysics of values founded upon two philosophies that were transferred in text only.

One consequence of this is the automatic ethnographic gaze not of Europe but within Cuba proper. In Cuba, some folks see other people as strangers divided from them by the Atlantic Ocean. A second consequence is that this gaze becomes ethnic and not even anthropological, which squeezes out the much-needed sociological perspective this topic requires. This view also makes it *seem* as though one were dealing with a minority, much in the way Europeans viewed the multiple minorities they encountered in their repeated incursions into Africa. Fourthly, forgetting for a moment that Greek ethics predates Jesus, a lack of metaphysics implies a dearth of values. Then, there is the fact that what has happened in Cuba is an absolute aesthetic appropriation, which explains why there is no museum of slavery on the island, but there are numerous cultural offices and groups who gain financially from “our African roots.” Finally, last but not least, the fact that the pagan African deities do not match up to the Holy Trinity prevents many from appreciating the special and particular relationship that many Cubans have with their gods and amongst themselves.

One can see how this particular view of things can cause an element essential in the creation of coexistence—different peoples' religious sociology (if they have one, and almost all of them do)—to be lost. This is what allows one to understand, or at least visualize that which most differentiates peoples who must coexist in one same place. If that is lost from sight, a basic element of our African origins that could have contributed to the nation-building process—tolerance, disappears. What is more, I would say it is the only element that would make possible the building of a modern nation.

I am not saying that the contribution tolerance itself would have made follows

racial lines—not at all. What I am saying is that in the Cuban example the potential sociological contribution of the Africans who were brought to the island was *wastefully discarded*. I am referring to the flexible and egalitarian relationship they see amongst their deities, who have no ideological or metaphysical issues to resolve amongst themselves or with the followers of their oracles. They also don't have a momentous view of creation, with its concomitant all-knowing, moral father, or final mysteries, both of which create a need for a dominant class of interpreters and administrators of the word and message.

None of this is present in religions of African origin. This interpretive flexibility is what makes them noteworthy: it supported an experiential morality that favored only tolerance and a focus on civil goals such as the simultaneous creation of an unavoidably modern nation and society—something that perplexed those who waged ideological wars. The deliberate repression of just such a sociology in order to embrace a debatable and folklorized aesthetic has always served those in power and impeded in the absolutely essential social integration we need to finish realizing a nation built upon mutually shared and shareable values.

The Ortiz fallacy also shut the door on another possible development that might have incorporated the deeply rooted social values of our African origins: an ethical approach that respected uncomprehended difference. To this day, African religious practices do not set forth a morality based on the kinds of metaphysical values that are thought out and discussed in academic institutions, as the West requires. Thus, in Cuba there was no way to ethically discuss a cultural reality that was forcefully destined to become the *only* truly possible human value.

This was and continues to be responsible for preventing a dialogue that was and still is possible between Anglo-Saxons and Africans, not at the level of religion—paradoxically—but at the level of values.

This accounts for the strange, cordial racism experienced by Cuban blacks and whites: the more blacks, who are *different*, adopt values directly taken from the Judeo-Christian tradition, the more less black they become. Yet, they will always be *different* because their level of tolerance, which they derive from their life experiences (read in Cuban culture as a tendency towards flippancy, negligence, and excessive rhythmic gesticulation), has not *endowed* them with the ability to interpret and reinvent the dominant yet mysterious secrets of the nation's metaphysical character, be it Catholic or Marxist, or any of the U.S. Southern Protestant varieties that predominate in Cuba. Some of this is certainly true, and leads to the existence of the first form of intolerance; it also shuts the door on being able to fully realizing the nation.

Certain Cuban intellectual circles might see this as laughable, even if constitutionally it should cause no laughter at all, except, perhaps, the healing kind. Yet, Cuban blacks were subjected to two different forms of metaphysical oppression—both Spanish Catechesis and State Marxification. If one accepts that neither Catholicism nor Marxism possess superior ethical values, then what transpired in Cuba—an attempt to make compatible the shared dialectics of Joaquim de Fiore's doctrine and Hegelism (which serves Marxism as a roadmap) with the horizontal view of things held by African religions—is not only shocking, but also impossible, particularly from the perspective of cultural anthropology.

Only tolerance would allow two totally different philosophical structures to coexist, but only if they espoused and shared an ethical view mutually arrived upon through a shared experience. But they could never exchange terms too rooted in unreachable dimensions of two different languages. One can see the possibility of dialogue between Christianity and Marxism, but the possibility of dialogue between these two and Yemayá seems entirely impossible.

So long as the Cuban State continues to base its superiority on a constitutionally codified ideology and revolutionary anthropolo-

gy (the product of which is the idea of the 'new Man') without considering the cultural and sociological nature of nearly half the island's population, all it will succeed in doing is delaying the nation's total realization, something only tolerance—Africa's greatest sociological contribution to the island—can achieve. Unwittingly, the state also establishes a form of institutionalized racism that nullifies and contradicts the multiple cultural values inscribed on Cuban society. Tolerance should be Cuban culture's next goal. It is vital to our possible nation.

Notes:

1. Cuesta Morúa, Manuel. "Los Futuros de la Isla". In *Poesía, arte y sociedad. Seis ensayos*. (Madrid: Editorial Verdum, 2006)