

ISLAS' intention with this "Profiles" section is to introduce our readers to the life, work, ideas, and perspectives of outstanding African descendents who live on the island, offering viewpoints regarding Cuba today and in the future. These black men and women are involved in politics, culture, civic activism, and religion.

MANUEL CUESTA MORÚA

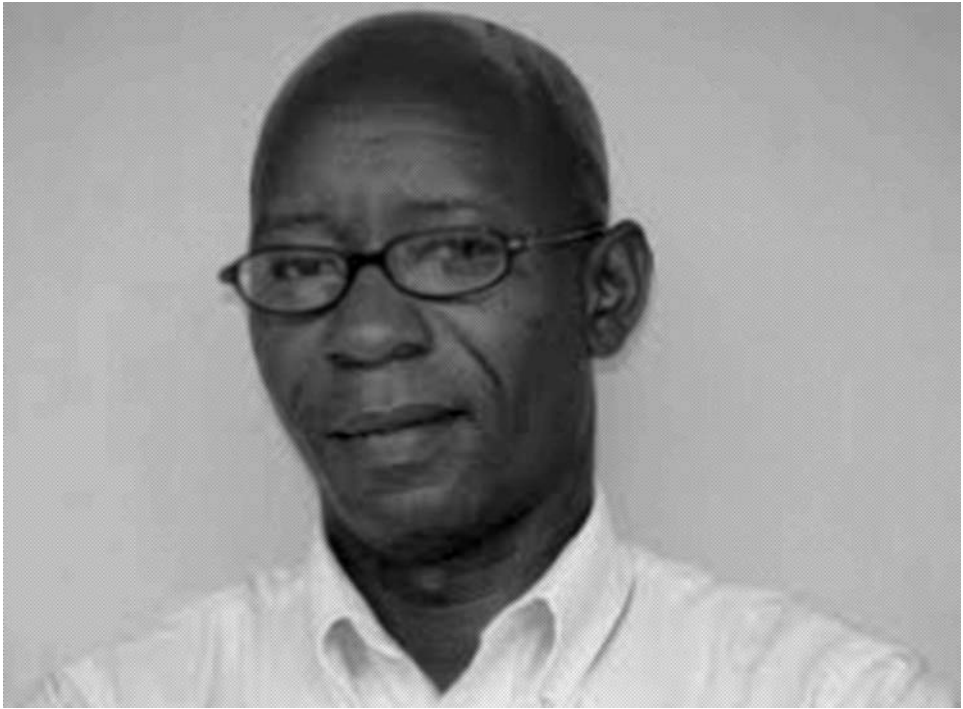
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Manuel Cuesta Morúa appeared on the scene about twenty years ago. Back then, in Cuba, he was known as *Kalule*—his childhood nickname during his involvement in the alternative political scene. He was involved with the democratic left at the beginning of the nineties, when it was moving towards being a more institutionalized movement—the Cuban Socialist Democratic Current (CSDS)—which was founded on January 16th, 1992. Cuesta Morúa rose from being a simple activist to being elected the Party's General Secretary, in 1996.

He was the creator and promoter of various political projects and initiatives, and the mastermind of the Progressive Arc Party (PARP), through which he united a number of leftist, democratic movements both in and outside of Cuba. Cuesta Morúa has not just become a progressive leader of international renown and importance. Anyone who observes and analyzes Cuban reality today must take his political and intellectual contributions into account.

Cuesta Morúa is a solid academic and intellectual. He graduated with honors with a degree in Contemporary History from the University of Havana (1986). Several graduate-level courses and much practice have further contributed to his career as a historian, philosopher, political scientist, and anthropologist. He is also a polyglot, speaking English, French and Portuguese—in addition to Spanish.

All this time, Cuesta Morúa has revealed himself to be brilliant essayist. He has already published various serious works (some yet to be published) about political theory and practice, and sociology. Some of them have earned prizes in different competitions. All in all, they are all part and parcel of an appreciably transcendental perspective on Cuba's present and future. This progressive leader also works with a number of alternative and illegal publications in Cuba, and with other legal ones abroad. His writing, declarations, and party documents clearly show the political and ethical principles that motivate him in his daily political struggle. Cuesta Morúa feels that



Manuel Cuesta Morúa

humanism, moderation, ethics, respect for one's self, others, and even adversaries, as well the institutionalization of alternative projects, should all become the solid base upon which Cuba's democratic future should be built.

This nearly fifty year-old man was born on Saint Sylvester's day, in 1962, seeming much younger than that because he is trim and energetic. In becoming a toughened, political and intellectual figure, he has not lost the simplicity or politeness that characterize him. He desires no notoriety or fame. He agreed to share with us—the readers of *ISLAS*—his ideas and criteria about a number of current topics.

LCC: A lineage that goes back to one of the most famous politicians of the early twentieth century (Martín Morúa Delgado), and being part of one Communist family and another Christian one has made you an agnostic social democrat, and a strict democrat.

Many people seem to reject politics, which I should clarify is really a rejection of politicians who have too often espoused reprehensible attitudes, lamentably. *How, why and what is politics for Kalule?*

MCM: I'll give you a difficult definition: everything is politics. I'll give you a common definition: politics is the art of the possible. I'll give a less accepted definition: politics is the art of making what is necessary, possible. If we put these three definitions together, we arrive at a much more comprehensive definition: politics is everything within the realm of possibility that we must do for the common good. The basic problem facing politics everywhere is how to define the common good. Who defines it? The government or its citizens? I think it should be the citizens, in a civic space—and never the government. A civic arena full of citizens is essential here. The phenomenon of politics is represented in a city

shaped naturally by a civil plurality. Politics is born of this because plurality must act for the good of all. The quality or lack thereof of politics must be measured according to its citizenry, in its plurality. If the civic and plural nature of this equation disappears, so does politics. What follows is domination, which is quite different.

This is why a common good defined by those in power leads to cynical attitudes in mature democracies, or to totalitarianism in immature societies (a total dissolution of politics). So-called ethical states that create this 'good' on their own, according to their own definitions, inevitably result in autocracies or totalitarian states. This is common in countries that are in an infantilized state, or have lost or don't have a notion of a *civis*. Without this civic condition, there is no society. At most, what we have is a sort of community, a place where symbols of the past, or patriarchs, and child-like adults, reign.

This definition leads me to the 'how' of politics. This requires us to return to the old notion that 'the ends do not justify the means.' I have always been impressed by Austrian, social democrat, Carl Bernstein's idea about the means being everything, and the ends nothing. Only this can make politics decent, the kind for which Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller has called. This is the only safeguard against man being the object of man, a concept and reality justified—by the way—by yet another terrible concept—man as human capital, emphasis on *capital*. In its essence, this leads me to a key issue: the 'how' of politics is ethics, ethics understood in two ways—acknowledgment of the *other*, which can lead to tolerance, and acknowledgment *through the other*, which can lead to a better concept: respect.

From 'what, and through 'how,' we get to the 'why.' Why politics? Because if citizens do not participate in politics in some way or

another—they become objects, they become its plaything.

I've always been somewhat perplexed by the very common notion that it is best to stay far away from politics. To me, this is somewhat akin to a form of public masochism. It has been clearly demonstrated that those who attempt to stay away from politics are the very ones who most suffer the effects of particular policies. This notion of 'distance' is very old; it comes from the Middle Ages, during which the real physical space that separated sovereigns from subjects, and lords from vassals, minimized the impact of decisions that may have taken a month or more to reach their affected subjects. This was not acceptable in ancient Greece or Rome; they valued citizens above all else. Yet, it was possible to create distance from politics even in antiquity, even naturally, because the limited means of communication functioned as an obstacle between the omnipresent State and its public. It was difficult or almost impossible for those in power to know about meetings anywhere at which possible disaffections against the lord, the sovereign or empire were expressed. Today, of course, that distance has been extremely minimized. The State is everywhere, even in democracies where the State is minimal. This leads me to explain two more, profounder ideas about citizens and politics. If citizens are not involved in politics, it will be impossible to achieve freedom of any sort in today's world. If we don't participate, we are leaving to others the total freedom to define the common good. Like it or not, we all live in a society and are part of it. We cannot afford the luxury of depriving it of our valuable ideas, even if in the end all we are doing is protecting ourselves from the State's constant interference, and its tendency to speak for us without even consulting us. The reason politics exists is so we can define the kind of society in which we want to live.

One of the greatest problems of our times is the image we get of politics from politicians and their attitudes. Because politicians' ideas are reprehensible, some folks say that politics is no good, that politics is inefficient. This thinking stems from assessing the degree to which people's conduct is moral (or immoral). I could proceed in a sophistic manner here, as do those who defend religion, despite the reprehensible attitude of those who control the word and will of God on Earth. Men, and not God, adduce those defenders. Yet, I am not a cynic nor do I care for condescension, thus I cannot accept that politics is filthy because politicians are immoral. Such a position would reflect the cynicism to which we citizens could succumb. For me, what is important is that we are a very tightly packed society, and all bathe in the same social waters. I don't assume that citizens are less corrupt or evil than politicians. What I do assume is that politicians are corrupt and bad, or that they tend towards reprehensible attitudes because society does, too. Thus, it is not a political problem but a problem of the whole society that is reflected in politics. On the one hand we have politics, which has access to a greater and higher level of publicity, and can more clearly point out in a citizen somewhere—in some dark corner of society—the very same kind of immorality it is guilty of itself. On the other, we've got politicians who are expected to display integrity, because they are in charge of public affairs, and have to inspire confidence and assurances, and include a concept of decency in their public lexicon. This makes them responsible, and I don't justify immorality in politicians—on the contrary. My reason for this is that I don't excuse immorality in anyone, and I am only referring to that of politicians because it is just a reflection of the very same immorality elsewhere.

There is a less cynical form of political culture that acknowledges the existence of

immorality in its society, and it attempts to ensure that its politicians be honest. This is accomplished by legal means and through the press. I will not offer examples; I don't want to pre-judge my choices. Yet, these cultures manage for their image of politics to be better than the actual image of their societies. Of course, Cuba's immorality is so generalized that the premise *zero politics-because-politics is dirty* just doesn't apply. Having said this, I want to affirm that I only believe in honest politicians, of course.

LCC: *In view of the enormous challenge of reconstructing a democratic and prosperous Cuba, what are the main vices or shortcomings of current Cuban politics?*

MCM: To overcome our almost inborn immaturity, depersonalize inevitable political conflicts, ethically reinvent ourselves, and laugh at the pretensions of political Messiahs. These four, positive actions are a response to four, basic shortcomings: psychological immaturity, a personalization of differences, disdain for ethics, and the strong impact that modern charlatans—like those political Messiahs—have had on us. The issue of ironic humor is very important. Contrary to popular belief, I think only irony can save us, and not the 'choteo' kind to which we are accustomed. Irony is public spiritedness; 'choteo' is its abandonment.

If we begin to achieve these things that constitute the cultural base of our political defects, we will be overcoming other challenges presented by hardball politics: the institutionalization of alternatives, the seriousness and consistency of political propositions, the supreme importance of the law, and thinking like a nation. These last two criteria, if inverted, are two more of our historical, fundamental shortcomings. In Cuba, power, and not the nation, has always been the context in which politics have been couched. This has made us a

weak country among nations, despite our eternal, gallant and daring courage. On the other hand, here politics is very voluntary. We must create a political will and, what about the law? What about limits?

It has been our tradition for the law and its limits to wait or adapt—not to social change but rather to the psychological fancy of those in power. We have been a political disaster, perhaps because we have also been a civic disaster, which is why we have been trapped by the total, pure, hard and willful domination of those with limited power, an obscene form of control because it is physical—from the bus driver all the way up to the maximum leader. Yet, I am particularly encouraged by one challenge: this power's source of legitimacy. Up till now, citizens have not been its source of legitimacy. Instead, it has been those in power, which is one more obstacle to the nation's democratization, legitimation, and strength. Practically speaking, though, Cuba has no citizens. We are, act and are treated like subjects. Naturally, we inherited this problem of legitimacy's source. Politics in Cuba has all along reproduced a patriarchal model as the origin of legitimacy for decisions made in society. A pre-modern legacy, it has historically weakened us. Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish thinker whose work is out of print, pointed out an interesting dichotomy I'd now like to paraphrase—strictly in the context of politics. When thinking of continental dilemmas, he utilized the terms 'weak States' and 'strong States.' The weak ones were the ones that presented themselves as strong, and engaged in grandiloquence, thus strengthening the position of the nations' "leaders" and weakening its citizens. The strong States, on the other hand, were mature, moderate, and measured. In other words, they appeared weak, respected limits, always acted according to law, and never forgot their source of legitimacy. Not confusing one's source of

legitimacy requires one more thing—a modernized public place for political discussions. Another challenge.

This modernization has yet to come to Cuba, and we are still faced with the problem of the avant-garde's pretensions. The notion that a class of educated and illuminated people has the obligation and right to lead the masses down the right path still exists here. This is nothing but fancy despotism, the same dilemma the clergy faced in society that French thinker Julien Benda so aptly described. What right have I to determine what another, less educated, or differently educated citizen should have, do or say, despite the fact that I have studied all my life, developed professionally in any disciplinary field, and been part of any academic institution, prestigious as it may be? None whatsoever. Of course, my knowledge may have value in our society, but that doesn't give me a vicarious power above the rest, or make me able to represent the rest of the citizenry. This is why the role of intellectual authority in politically modern societies shaped by mature citizens is precisely to criticize power. An intellectual is just the same as anyone else when it comes to building coexistence—nothing more, nothing less. The day we replace 'we the people' (which syntactically displaces power and legitimacy to a place above us) to 'we the citizens,' we will have triumphed as a society and nation.

This historical goal in Cuba makes that aforementioned modernization all the more necessary. Intellectuals are incredibly vain, particularly in a country run by an illustrated, despotic elite, and where it has been historically incapable of defining a more or less satisfactory nation-building project. In the first place, its entire epistemology, which frames possible knowledge, has always been divorced from Cuba's cultural base. A new public place for a discussion and definition of the most legiti-

mate base for Cuba—its citizens, in all their diversity and plurality—must be erected on this historical and cultural failure. This is the way to displace power and legitimacy with a downward motion. Maturity, prudence, a respect for the rules of the game, a sense of limits, as well as a sense that intellectuals are not infallible—even if it is in our favor—are the things that will allow us to build a strong and serious nation, and a lawful and law abiding State. However, that sense of seriousness should also include our perennial smile. I think one of our greatest challenges in the future involves the prerequisites necessary for all this—respect for determined words, for example. The ease with which we Cubans dissolve publicly declared commitments is frightening. We will never get anywhere this way.

LCC: *How do you see Cuba's political and social future?*

MCM: My answer is tentative. If we overcome vices and accept the nature of our challenges, the future will be that of a country that is solid in each and every way. There are some prerequisites for achieving this in Cuba that may dim our optimism. But we have to work hard to overcome our cultural shortcomings. I am more and more convinced that culture is the most important thing for nations to be able to make progress—culture as values, a way of thinking, and rules of coexistence. I do see the possibility of building a stable society here, and really like the idea of societal stability because it stems from a process of a consensual creation and recreation of values, to guarantee that our coexistence includes wellbeing—particularly in pluralistic and postmodern ones like Cuba's, which can evolve quickly. Cuba's future is guaranteed in every other way. Everyone knows, for example, that 10 families freely working in the restaurant business could bring down the State's food services in six months—even that of higher rated hotels,

too. Cuba's economic modernization is guaranteed, if we can rid ourselves of the kind of *rentier* and mercantile State we have here, and exists only here. This sort of State cannot be found even in the Middle East's monarchies, with their many oil-related reasons to survive by charging enormous and confiscatory taxes, setting monopolizing prices, and actually barely working. There is strategic thinking even in those places.

LCC: *What do you have to say about the reality of contemporary Cuba's race problem?*

MCM: Objectively—it is sad. Yet, unlike years before, there is now a much livelier and important debate about it that essentially says that Cuba is a racist country. Not that all Cubans are racists, but rather that decisions that legitimate and establish what is good, pretty, possible, and reachable in our society are racist, which traps those who are not racist—both psychologically and culturally. Essentially, the problem of racism has taken root in the two most important environments of any society: the power structure and our national culture. A friend of mine was saying that there are two Argentines in each Cuban: the first, a grandiose kind of guy, who was not very critical about himself or his society. He always avoided introspection, except that Argentines at least confess to their psychoanalysts. The second Argentine within us always sees himself as Caucasian. This little joke provides us with a sharp observation that serves as a snapshot of our current reality and race problem. What can one say when the most recent Cuban census reports that only 10% of the population is black? What can one respond to a rabidly racist remark like “Black? Not even the soles of my shoes.” Furthermore, this double internalization of racism has created a kind of structural racism that permeates the possibility of access, wellbeing, representation, social and economic capitalization, public

symbolicization, and definition of power. Few recognize an essential point in all of this, which is that racism is becoming institutionalized via Article 5 of the current Cuban Constitution.

I have gone over a number of contemporary constitutions, and would like to review the 192 that should exist, according to the United Nations. So far, I have found none that establishes an ideological group, or any kind of group that governs with all the “legitimate” calm possible because it considers itself *superior* to all other ideological, cultural, etc., groups. We can agree on one point: all ideology is born of a particular worldview. If I think that mine is superior to yours, then I’m taking one step towards cultural racism. This overvaluation of one’s self is psychologically inevitable; this is the space in which insecurity becomes combined with a profound sense of self worth. Yet, if the notion of superiority appears in a written and inscribed form all throughout the constitution, what we have, then, is institutionalized racism. This kind of racism is reparable, but it is not visible or apparent to us because we are used to following a kind of racism that goes along ethnic or color lines. Yet, in the end, racism can only take hold through culture. Our constitution’s racism is a problem in Cuba, and it requires a definitive solution, because it feeds the cultural racism from which it stems. By now, of course, I’m not sure why communists in the twenty-first century consider themselves to be superior. There is nothing to justify that, not in the realm of morality, attitudes, or knowledge. Yet, since power can confuse things in most cases, we have here a kind of power that does not realize it is legitimating itself, unwittingly, perhaps, on a racist supposition that has been publicly embraced by all of the State’s and society’s structures and institutions.

LCC: *What steps should be taken to confront this situation firmly, and in a manner that has the possibility of being successful in solving the race problem in Cuba?*

MCM: Only three steps: open debate that should include citizens, public policies (not only the State’s) to correct historical inequalities, and a political reform that guarantees the rights of Cuba’s culturally diverse people to participate in the definition of the kind of society and State we should and can have. These three steps will cause racism to feel cornered, which is highly important, because Cuba’s national model does not fit the cultural structure of its society. The distance between one and the other is colonial, and we should initiate a process for our own, internal decolonization. This is the only way we can have a nation-building project the way it should be, based on culture—where imagination, society, and the State coincide—something that has never been done in Cuba. I feel we are facing an opportunity to reestablish our nation in an excellent way. All we need is courage, determination, and the power to call upon all our possible knowledge, so that together—and not above the citizenry—we can shed light on the ‘how’ to make progress in the race issue—finding a rhythm of our own that will make this possible. This is crucial, which is why I am in total agreement with anthropologist Ileana Faguaga when she insists—anywhere I read or hear her—we should urgently pass from our *criollo* national model to a Cuban national model. It is urgent because Cuba’s denationalization is occurring quickly. She sees that we Cubans are the only ones in the world who so admire a second nationality while still living in our own country. The race issue is one of the keys to this very necessary transition, and I don’t know if it is inevitable.