

Skirting 1912

Manuel Cuesta Morúa
Historian and political scientist
Havana, Cuba

Using the date is symbolic. As far as history is concerned, a hundredth anniversary can become a cyclical phenomenon with which we revisit memory, either to seriously condemn past events, or to vividly, happily participate in remembering foundational or memorable events. Or, we might just experience them from the vantage point of the present's well-being, as something aesthetic and scholarly.

Rarely do we revisit a hundred year-old, past event, to experience it as a process, as a contemporary recreation of what mentalities and similar actions and attitudes capable of quelling any perspective there were—no matter how optimistic—about the idea of progress. When this happens, when distant dates, a century ago, are conflated and confused with contemporary ones, we are creating a short circuit: what comes about when chronology and cultural regression collide. This explains why it often seems to us that even if we progress in time, we also take a step back, culturally. This is the fate of people who repeat themselves, their way of being, thinking and acting, even despite a will to do otherwise.

The idea of progress, of course, continues to be a powerful one due only to its maturation. Past times were not always bet-

ter or worse, nor is the future condemned to succeed or fail. Essentially, this has to do with what results from the synergy of values and paradigms. If the future is not empirically provable, it is because the past is not necessarily its precursor or predictor. The past is as much inscribed with as many possible paths as the future is with one or various of those pasts—and not necessarily the best ones. The past must be pluralized once and for all, so its hues, the values behind its horrors and quotidian nature, can be appreciated—beyond the narrative. If literature teaches us more than history, it is because even the least interesting examples of it can ignore the varied richness of its characters.

This leads to undertaking an ongoing evaluation of our origins, no so much to block our destiny, but rather to scrutinize our tendencies...and choose. One thing is certain: if we do not reread the past, our plural past, our options for choosing from our multiple presents towards an equally plural future are also eliminated.

All this leads me to a hypothesis: 2012 is no better for blacks in Cuba than 1912. Let me further clarify this with yet another hypothesis: the culture of 1912 Cuba still persists in 2012, but with two additional complications: a loss of certain fundamental values and the

intellectual and social decadence of the idea of nation.

Allow me a brief digression so I can clarify this second, essential point: if the debate about the future nation is livelier within the Catholic church than the lay academe, this is precisely illustrative of one of those additional problems plaguing already preexisting conditions affecting the future of the black Cuban community: a reinvention of the cultural paradigm of our failure as a nation.

Is José Antonio Saco coming back? If we were honest with ourselves, we'd have to say that he never actually left us: Saco's nation is that basic framework that reveals its foundational greatness through its ability to permeate all the modes of coexistence that the Cuban nationality produced on its own—from the latest, colonial era, through the republic period, and even within the Revolution. It continues serving as a principal reference point at times of crisis. This is what makes it truly interesting that the Cuban intelligentsia's crisis regarding the idea of nation can be solved only by remobilizing modern versions of the very same concept of nation we inherited from this thinker (Saco): a Cuba designed by elites, and ideated through Catholicism, even if only to criticize it; a school of thought that filters through to other people according to how they are perceived as socially or politically dangerous. It sees the area of aesthetics as a space from within which to control the socialization of cultural marginalization; it coopts black people according to two critical functions: an intellectual one—to blacken the original, ruling elite's norms, and an operative one—to use excessive methods to totally control its own race, in order to “keep clean” and “assuage” white power centers, which always feel threatened by the “filth” and “noise” that constant and always reproduced

marginality produce. This is a surprisingly unscathed concept of nation, even in terms of economics: a regional or local, semiproductive economy oriented more to the needs of those in power and foreigners than to the solidification of a generalizable well-being that could include the creative autonomy of all real and potential economic agents.

Why did 1912 become 2012 or, why is 2012 equivalent to 1912? There are a number of cultural and sociological reasons that remain constants in possible definitions of the Cuban nation.

Before continuing, I want to make clear what I am not doing in my analysis. Above all, and principally, what I am not doing is comparing the living standards, well-being and social accessibility of black people in Cuba within the historical framework of a century (1912-2012). There are two reasons for this. First, a comparison such as this would be misleading and requires many series of statistics that simply don't exist in Cuba. Unfortunately, for the school of Cuban history, econometrics did not take a prominent place in our historical studies. Thus, there needs to be discussions more serious than about whether it was better or worse to eat dried meat, sweet potatoes and codfish, or to consume a milk substitute now, such as *Cerelac*. The second reason is that I will maintain—till the end of my days—that black poverty in Cuba is a byproduct of racism, and not vice versa. The elimination of some of the black middle and upper class happened as early as between 1812-1846. I would even dare say that this elimination was carried out by the nineteenth-century, middle class itself. In modern times, one need not look beyond who the members of the *Club de Atenas* were to convincingly prove that poverty and wealth in Cuba is not divided strictly along color lines.

Racism in Cuba is cultural and symbolic. From there, its influences moves up to affect the political sphere, and then it trickles downwards towards society's sociological division. Not unlike a Greek tragedy, the conflict this represents is the very tragedy of the Cuban nation's conformation—even now.

It is my intention to shed light—from three different perspectives—on these two fused dates, 1912 and 2012, which mark the hundredth anniversary of a return to the very same place where this racism first started.

The first involves the conflict of modernity. Thus, I will start with the nature of the Independent Party of Color's (PIC) program and how it contrasted with dominant ideology. I want to talk about a set of the PIC's proposals that were best analyzed by Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas in another article. My purpose is solely to show Cuban modernity in its pure state, which has no precedent and little importance in Cuba's political programs:

- State repatriation of all Cubans who wish to return to the country and lacked the means with which to do so
- A review of land deeds written and executed during the first U.S. intervention
- A nationalization of work by means of a law that guarantees the preferential hiring of Cubans over foreigners
- A distribution of State land as colonies or parcels or of lands acquired for the use of those who lack resources
- Laws for the regulation of child labor
- Disability insurance for work accidents
- The creation of a naval and military school
- Free and mandatory education, including free tertiary education
- Non-selective immigration
- Trial by juries populated with both black and white citizens

- Opposition to the death penalty
- Penal reform
- Work tribunals
- Appointing of black citizens to the diplomatic corps

Calvo Cárdenas' analysis sees something essential in the relationship between the Cuban nation's original ideology, which turns the PIC program into part of the debut of Cuban progressivism—after and together with Diego Vicente Tijera's program. However, what I am interested in is emphasizing the contrast between rooted, cultural modernity with what is really the semi- and often anti-modernity of the power elite.

Let us focus on the modern, nationalist vision that bases the nation upon all its citizens according to culture and birth, whether or not they live in the country; an institutionalized view of property that rejects the chaotic greed of occupation; the total nationalization of work at a time when white immigration was dramatically increasing; a view of the State as a just social service provider, when the elite sees it as its own; the creation and provisioning of a republican army, to follow the instrumental abdication of classical republicanism; the democratization of tools essential to social mobility, such as education; the democratization of legal institutions, with representative equality on juries and in courts; the total modernization of the State—a democratic State should never be given the right of life or death over those who seriously violate the law—and the creation of a post-racial reality in the State's visible and representative institution (its diplomatic corp is one of the most visible, prestigious and socially representative ones in any republic).

This is about integral modernization, which goes beyond the PIC's progressive pro-

gram. This final point is important, in my view, because as far as a sociological redistribution of power is concerned, as well as of the public's representation in politics and a foreseeable fusion among closed elites, it breaks with the legacy of privilege that comes with inheritance. These are social facts that are harmful, and have harmed many modernizing processes all throughout history. Only that particular modernity can allow a future in which errors are corrected and assimilation to new ideas and practices can happen via modern methods. This is essential in any kind of integral modernity: a social and cultural rejection of revolutionary methods.

Yet, what do we have to compare with regarding what the supposedly modern elites who initiated the republic put out there? History offers us the facts. However, what is important about this lies in the semi- or anti-modernity employed by the nation's ruling elite. For someone really educated, like pedagogue and philosophy lover José Enrique Varona, blacks were not part of the nation's cultural project. For an intellectually and civically oriented man like Jorge Mañach, Cuba's crisis is a crisis of high culture, and not of the paradigms of that high culture. For Fernando Ortiz, in his early career, blackness equals marginality. For all the elite, the new nation was essentially a continuation of Spain, but via more modern methods.

These include the concentration of unproductive land reproduced by medieval style inheritance; the promotion of white immigration and colonization, which distorts and totally delays the cultural completion of the nation, and strengthening of civic culture as a base for democracy; a persistent, imperial, economic mentality that favors the possession of large tracts of foreign lands over native economic viability

(the importance of the colony as an essential, productive unit that was barely understood by the elite); violent uprisings as a way out of conflicts of power; a Spanish colonial view of what a unified homeland was, which created a politically closed elite demonstrate, and among other things, the strong anti-modern tendency with which this elite initiated the nascent republic while wrapping itself in the workings of an progressive constitutionality.

Cuba's foundational moments, with all their progressive glitz, efficiently hid the strong, anti-modern tendencies of a large part of its governing elite. Because Cuba's process of political normalization came late, it had to pretend to behave in a way much of the Western world already had embraced. This was the case in 1902, 1940 and 1959. As it usually happens, appearances won out over reality, Cuba's social and political life has never been judged for what it is. Instead, it has been judged for what it is said to be. Notwithstanding, anti-modernity is the moving force behind its elites, regardless of what they say or their voluntary actions. The ease with which the Cuban intellectual elite assumed and incorporated the notion of vanguard, an aesthetic concept received via Czarist Russia's cultural underpinnings, and globalized through politics, is a vivid example of social and political anti-modernity. This explains why the political methodology to which elites turn the most is revolution, despite the fact that an open society offers other tools with which to find a peaceful resolution to controversies. Even today, this limitation is at the root of the self-elected, governing elite's inability to understand that the Cuban nation will never come to fruition if it does not fully live its culturally modern condition, which results precisely from the

plurality of its distinct components—beyond aesthetics and hedonism.

The second cultural assumption that guides my analysis reveals how out of step that elite is when it should acknowledge the social legitimacy of political conflicts. Upon reading its reaction to the PIC's "uprising" through time, which has remained unchanged, one sees a common thread: its attempt to disqualify the PIC for its use of violence to bring about the social and political change articulated in their demands. This disqualification amply reveals how the Saco paradigm functions: delegitimize the actors outside the elite's paradigm by appropriating and using the methods and resources of those who believe themselves to have a physical and cultural monopoly. This is the structural reason behind what can be seen as cynicism—plain and simple—from a moral and historical point of view—because violence is essential to the identity of Cuban politics. Violence is what Cuban society has learned and lived since its inception, and not only as an act of legitimate self-defense from any adversary's attack, but as a pedagogical value for achieving civil, political, cultural and productive objectives.

Social and political violence are fundamental, almost an inherent concept in the construction of the Cuban State, nation and society: the revolution. I would like to reiterate that the use of violence to achieve any objective concerning power almost completely characterizes Cuba—even more so than any concept that attempts to control, define and promote changes in society. There is deep violence, the kind one sees in independence struggles; gleeful violence, resulting from a basic need to affirm power; and psychological violence, which happens because of a lack of a conceptual language anthropologically as-

sumed by most of society, with which to dissolve large or small conflicts.

The PIC's violence is nothing more than an expression of the violence lived and legitimated by the behavior of all preceding generations throughout history. The elite's criticism of it, in an attempt to dumb down knowledge, in order to distance it from its real historical basis, hides its old fear regarding the empowerment of blacks; in this case, the use of learned and well understood methods: rational violence.

This game and display of mentalities leads to yet another supremely important event: the condemnation of the Morúa Amendment (1810), which prohibited the organization of political parties according to race. What essentially motivates this condemnation? The ability to blame it for the ultimately fatal PIC "uprising." The argument is that if Martín Morúa Delgado had not proposed the amendment that came to bear his name, there would have been no uprising and, consequently, no massacre. Yet, this is faulty logic because it assumes that there was not an intermediate solution, one somewhere between a legal prohibition and armed rebellion—which is in no way true. Thus, critics of the uprising demoralize the violence inherent in historical processes. Those who justify it see it as an inevitable resort when all other avenues of social understanding are closed.

Yet, learned violence is expressed in natural ways, as is evident in the elite's genocidal reaction to the assault on its paradigms perpetrated by a race it considered outside the historical process. As Cuban history, itself, shows, no law was or is needed for this to happen. In a certain sense, what is clear is that black people can only bear arms while under the control of the elite, and for reasons defined and framed by it.

My reading of the 1912 “uprising” and the Morúa Amendment is different. I classify the former through a cultural category that allows the nation to be defined and changed from within the context of its own, fundamental problems and subjects. In my opinion, this “uprising” is the nascent republic’s first, really national conflict. Through its violence, it represents the social demands present in the nation’s narrative—since its inception. I see the Morúa Amendment not as a logical continuation of the republic creed, nor as a way to avoid the nation’s rupture along race lines, but rather as the moral and intellectual neutralization of the supremacist tendencies inherited from colonial times, which could lead to apartheid-like doctrines.

The violence of the independence wars attempted to create a nation facing outwardly: towards Spain. It was the same kind of violent emancipation that had played out throughout the Americas, and to which Cuba was no stranger. Yet, Cuba came to this process quite late. This allowed its foundational ideology to absorb lots of social content. The nation was being built outwardly, but times required that it happen inwardly, as well. Its foundational crisis was to realize a social nation, or be incomplete when it came into being as a nation. Thus, it was not just a question of negative emancipation—of abolishing slavery, for example—but also of positive emancipation, that is, citizens being able to participate fully and equally in public and private spaces. The fact that the nation that did come into being was not socially complete brought about the eruption of a conflict that could have been avoidable, if the process had followed its foundational purpose.

Unlike the other independence struggles in the Americas, the problem in Cuba’s case is that the Cuban nation comes into being and

even is made possible because it must incorporate the social. Thus, despite the horror, the importance of the 1912 “uprising” lies in the fact it reveals that the Cuban nation is possible only if it simultaneously resolves the dual process of national and social emancipation—and this, at its very roots, and not in the details.

Even today, this foundational problem is examined without taking into consideration all the intellectual and political consequences of our foundational paradigm, which we inherited from imperial Spain, was well translated for us through Saco’s notion of nation, and is grounded in the concept of an organic and unified nation. What relation does any of this have with real Cuba, with its diversity of components and subjects? None. What does said concept of unity have to do with the emancipatory objectives that define the Cuban national project? Less yet.

The unified and organic nation arises from an imperial Spanish concept that has only a top-down and centripetal definition of the nation, with the nation absorbing, legitimating and giving meaning to the constituent parts. This explains why this view of unity was made possible by the cross (faith) and the sword (violence). Thus, this view of unity is a conservative and retrograde concept that contradicts freedom—the moral and theoretical concept that makes independence, self-emancipation and open-mindedness regarding social, political and cultural challenges possible. This is the very concept against which those who struggled for Cuba’s independence rose up.

Yet, it is from the perspective of this foundational doctrine that the 1912 “uprising” is judged, which limits the possibility of understanding it. Seeing it as a political limitation keeps one from examining it as a

truly foundational event. In fact, quite the opposite is true; it had no chance of succeeding, as if the independence wars ever had. It divided the body of the nation, a nation that the elite had already demonstrated was “very united” in 1906. The psychological and moral underpinnings of this conservative doctrine of national unity are documented in this racist elite’s mental trajectory: a Haitian syndrome and racial supremacy. The logical result of this explains why these elite tend to be intellectually and culturally reactionary, because it presupposes that national integration is dangerous.

The Morúa Amendment should be read as a legal solvent of the intellectually and culturally, reactionary core of the criollo elite. Even today, one can read, hear and observe in many “progressive” Cubans an almost antediluvian, racist core that tried and true, yet more sophisticated racists would never reveal.

The fact is that Martín Morúa Delgado is inscribed in that evolutionary, anti-rupture philosophy of political reform, something I intend to write about at length in a different article. This conception of politics attempts to divorce itself from the violent tradition of the revolution in which he, himself, participated. Had it had any teeth, this concept might have been very interesting, and would have impacted the island’s political modernity in fundamentally civilizing ways. Furthermore, when I talk about reformism, I am doing so within the context of political nationalism, which is quite different from the reformism there was under earlier Spanish domination.

Notwithstanding, what is important here had to do with intellectual and cultural underpinnings, and their moral consequences. This must be put into perspective. In my opinion, this is present, underlying, in Morúa Delgado’s thought.

What do I intuit his perception to be? That he knew that judgment and prejudice—both of which were nurtured historically and culturally—could not be destroyed via radical or symbolic confrontations. His opposition to racial political parties was establishing a grounded way to prevent the concentration of moral, religious, intellectual and political forces that would have established in Cuba a coherent, economically viable and socially consistent form of supremacy based on minor theories, but that, nonetheless, would have been efficient and had an overwhelming social and structural impact on a black community that was in many ways weaker.

If racism in Cuba did not manage to forge a solvent doctrine, despite all the failed attempts, this can be attributed in part to the fact the criollo elite lacked the justification necessary to venture down truly promising political, religious and intellectual paths, in order to theorize its right to dominate. Their religious and cultural efforts, or just simply their moral prejudice, suffered internally due to the flaws in their own beliefs and in the actual foundational basis upon which the republic was created, in any case. The existence of a black party, as it was and still is called, would have conferred much needed legitimacy upon a white supremacist doctrine that would never have been possible in Cuba. The consequences of such a doctrine in Cuba would have been disastrous to the requisite cultural underpinnings of our coexistence.

A foundational racism that still has to filter through as prejudices is not the same as one that enjoys the solid patina of an intellectual tradition. The latter is much more difficult to dissolve.

The Morúa Amendment prevented this from happening, but it did not close the door to other options. It was not able to prevent

the revolutionary option that erupted during the nascent republic's first, social conflict from happening. Violence is part of our social nature, so what I am asking myself is if the PIC massacre could have been better avoided by legalizing the PIC or not.

Yet, the proposal still exists: that of the black community not being able to legitimately use the same weapons that are used against it. Is a defense of race illegitimate? *Criollos* always have believed that it is—and still do. Morúa Delgado, in defending the legitimacy of said defense, proposed other weapons—also disallowed—which pass for civilization, education, integrated political action, civility and culture. A triumph of manners and content, which is key to the democratization of paradigms. This is the best proposal, and it is directed against a basic racist presupposition: that blacks cannot in anyway defend themselves.

The third and last assumption made about 1912 and 2012 reflects the permanent, aesthetic-symbolic hegemony of the *criollos'* historical paradigms.

I will not now analyze this because I plan to devote another entire text to the topic. Yet, my approach will be provocative and I will not be talking as much about what is lacking in this aesthetic, but about what it contains too much of. I am not referring to a permanent strategy of hiding things, but instead to the visible hiding of black monumentality, hagiography and patristics in Cuba. Furthermore, I am less interested in their phenomenology, and more in their basic concepts and suppositions, which are visible in towns, cities, dates, commemorations, graphic identities, numismatics and festivals throughout the nation.

Today, we live in a 1912 free of visible massacres, and among .com networks.