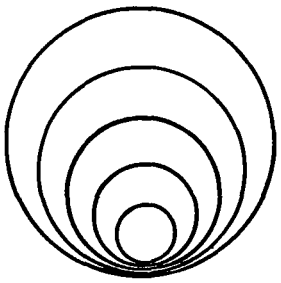

# BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

## Ernie Cortes: Part I

**Producer: Gail Pellett**

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## Ernie Cortes: Part I

**BILL MOYERS**: *[voice-over]* Ernie Cortes doesn't own any oil wells, banks or shopping malls, and he hasn't been elected to public office. But a Texas business magazine named him one of the five most powerful Texans, along with people like H. Ross Perot. Another Texas publication awarded Cortes its 1990 Social Justice award.

For Ernie Cortes, though, the real rewards come from people like these. He's taught them how to organize at the grassroots all over the state of Texas. And by organizing, to challenge the status quo.

**WOMAN**: *[speaking at ceremony]* San Antonio is completely different because of the efforts of Ernie Cortes. He shared his vision with a silent, silent majority, and as a result, we changed the political culture of San Antonio.

**MOYERS**: *[voice-over]* But his influence reaches beyond Texas. *The Los Angeles Times* called Cortes "the most effective Latino grassroots organizer in the country today," after he set up an organization called UNO in East L.A.

Now he's organizing in Tucson and Phoenix. Officially, Cortes works for the Industrial Areas Foundation, started in Chicago in the 1940s by the noted organizer, Saul Alinsky. Alinsky wanted to teach the have-nots about political power. In that tradition, Cortes nurtures leaders from within communities, housewives and firefighters, secretaries and schoolteachers.

**2nd WOMAN**: Part of this training is to motivate you, and to agitate you. And it's in that challenge that makes us grow, that is itself the teaching part of organizing.

**MOYERS**: *[voice-over]* Many of these organizers come out of religious communities, congregation and clergy. The Texas Interfaith Network is the umbrella group for organizations throughout the state. They represent some 350 churches and half a million families.

Ernie Cortes grew up in San Antonio, joined the ROTC in high school and studied economics at the University of Texas. In the '60s, he dropped out of graduate school to work with the United Farmworkers in the Rio Grande Valley. In 1974, he began to build an organization in San Antonio called COPS, Communities Organized for Public Services.

**3rd WOMAN**: *[speaking to audience]* Who pays and who benefits? Because we will not be ripped off, will we? Y que viva COPS!

**MOYERS**: *[voice-over]* By the end of COPS' first decade, representatives of sister organizations from all over Texas came to celebrate their victories, victories that had brought paved roads and drainage ditches, housing and economic development funds, a college campus and libraries to Mexican-American neighborhoods.

In Austin, they've worked on getting rid of abandoned housing. In the Rio Grande Valley, they've brought paved roads and sewers to their communities. In south Phoenix, they're working on safety for their neighborhoods.



But Ernie Cortes would be the first to say that these organizations are not just about issues. They're about ideas. We caught up with Cortes at a motor hotel in New Jersey, where he was training future organizers from around the country and the world.

**ERNIE CORTES**: Three times a year, our organization, the Industrial Areas Coalition, does national training. We bring people from all over the country to 10 days of training, dealing with issues like power, self-interest, politics, the difference between public and private relationships, et cetera, and to teach people about public discourse, public life.

**MOYERS**: What's the key to organizing?

**CORTES**: A love of politics in the Greek sense.

**MOYERS**: In the Greek sense?

**CORTES**: In the Greek sense. Not in the electoral sense.

**MOYERS**: Aristotelian?

**CORTES**: Aristotelian sense. Family, property, education. Decisions which affect those institutions. The public debate, the discussion. Understanding that we are social beings, okay, that our development only takes place to the extent that we engage in public life and public discourse. That there is a joy — Hannah Arendt's phrase, "the joy of public happiness," I think, is appropriate here.

**MOYERS**: You use the word discourse. There's not much discourse, though, in politics today, is there?

**CORTES**: There's not much discourse in what I call the quadrennial electronic plebiscite that we have every four years in this country, which has very little to do with politics. It has to do with marketing strategies, marketing segments, direct mailing, polling. But that is not politics. That is not what de Tocqueville talked about, which he thought was the really, you know, important, positive of this whole American experience, that people's willingness and love of public discourse and debate and dealing with local issues connected— and doing it from an institutional base, you know, working through these media, the institutions. He was just really enormously impressed by the potential that this offered.

Of course, he also saw some real serious potential problems, like slavery, you know, et cetera, the fact that people were left out. And one of the things that I guess we're interested in is making sure that people who are normally considered, you know, the have-nots, or normally considered disconnected don't get left out. So, well, I guess what I want to do, what I like to do is to organize people who are not part of that decisionmaking in most communities.

**MOYERS**: To do what?

**CORTES**: To be part of the decisionmaking process, to be involved in politics. For them to see that there is a way in which they can qualitatively improve their lives.

**MOYERS**: Not just to turn out and vote.

**CORTES**: No, no. No. Although— I mean, well, voting is important, but I think Robert Dahl *[?]* once said, a very similar book, *Politics, Economics and Welfare*, that voting — and maybe he's quoting Dewey — that voting is the least important aspect of any democratic decisionmaking. It's the affirmation of a decision, which is being

made through a process of discussion and debate. They have voting in totalitarian countries, okay. Pinochet used to have plebiscites in Chile, and I would not consider that a very democratic society under Pinochet. There was no discussion, there was no debate, there was no free press, there was no opportunity for people to engage.

There's a guy named Asch who talks about central Europe, the internal immigration that takes place where people kind of withdraw into their own cocoons. It takes place where there's no public space, where there's no opportunity for debate. And I see some of that occurring in the United States, not because of some totalitarian dictator, but because of the role that media plays in politics, the fact that people feel disconnected from it, they feel alienated from it because of the money that's involved in it. That it's required— somebody says that, you know, it takes about $4 million to run in an average senatorial campaign, which means that the average U.S. senator had to spend— has got to raise $15,000 a day, which means he doesn't have a whole lot of time to do much else but— besides raise money.

**MOYERS**: How does that relate to what you're trying to do with these people? You want them to have a love of politics, you said, but for what purpose?

**CORTES**: Well, I want them to— I think that they— that we can't rely on people by themselves, okay, to be good, okay? They have to participate through institutions. So there have to be institutions that can hold— there have to be institutions and culture which holds people accountable, okay, or which teaches them certain values. And I think that there has to be some framework to making— for people to make judgments.

You can't just— I mean, we're bombarded with all kinds of information. We're overstimulated, in one sense, okay? So there's no— but there's no framework for analyzing the public policies of different people. So what do we base our decisions on? Well, there quotes, their character, their personality, their character, how well they, you know, appear on a *People* magazine, et cetera.

I guess what I'm trying to say to you is that the institutions that used to teach people, that used to enable people to make — whether they were political parties, whether they would be labor unions, whether they would be churches, whether they would be voluntary associations — those institutions don't exist anymore, or they've been rendered incompetent. We— you know, the schools don't function in that way, the churches don't function in that way. Maybe the synagogues do, but the churches don't, okay? And so we need to recreate some institutions so that people can participate through some sort of institutional framework. And that's what we're trying to build through a COPS or through a Valley Interfaith or through East Brooklyn Churches, is trying to build some sort of institutional framework which will enable people to acquire the requisite skills, information and so that they can make political judgments, so they don't just operate on the basis of their opinions.

**MOYERS**: What kind of skills?

**CORTES**: Understanding power, understanding how it operates, understanding who wields it, understanding that you have to know not only what a politician says, but who gives him money, how those



people influence his decisions. You have to know his record. You have to understand, you know, the history of certain issues and where they count, you know. You have to understand how to negotiate with people. You have to know how to present your issue carefully. You have to understand how to do the research behind a particular issue. But more importantly, you have to know how to build a relationship.

**CORTES**: *[training session]* This is a meeting, this is a relational meeting. And it's really an action. It's a public drama, it's a one-act play that you're doing with a person. Okay. Have you done one? Why don't you come up?

**CORTES**: The organizations that we build are not going to work unless people, ordinary people, can build a relationship with people they don't know very well.

**STUDENT ORGANIZER**: What's your work?

**CATHOLIC PRIEST**: I'm a Catholic pastor, small neighborhood parish in Port Arthur. Traditionally Cajun, but going Hispanic, black and Vietnamese all at the same time.

**ORGANIZER**: All at the same time, huh?

**PRIEST**: Yeah, and I don't know if I know how to handle it.

**ORGANIZER**: You said that you're feeling uncomfortable with the situation. How— you've been in ministry how many years?

**PRIEST**: Thirty-three.

**ORGANIZER**: Thirty-three. What keeps you in it?

I think you've got a good challenge right now.

**PRIEST**: Well, okay, and I'm glad you surfaced that idea, because I'm sort of caught betwixt and between, you know. I would like for the new neighbors to identify with St. Joseph Church. A large percentage of the blacks go back to their other church, you know. They don't stop going to church. A large number of the Vietnamese go to their cultural church. So, I don't— is my role to steal them from the other church, or do I build a community— and are the ones I'm getting frustrated with their own church? On a church level. Then, on a civic level, I don't think we're getting the community services that we should be doing. And that's what brings me up here.

**CORTES**: Let me freeze for a second here. This is interesting, but it could be a lot more interesting if you'd let him answer the question that you asked him, which I thought was a really great question, and I wanted to give you a star for that question, but then that was bad because you didn't let him answer it when he started to answer it. Is that fair?

**ORGANIZER**: I'm not sure which question you're referring to.

**CORTES**: You know, "Why are you still in it?" Why are you still a priest?

**ORGANIZER**: Oh.

**PRIEST**: He started to ask me that.

**CORTES**: Yeah, he started— no, he started, he did good. And you did good, you did great, you were good. Profound.

**PRIEST**: Maybe I could have gone *[crosstalk]*—

**CORTES**: Or let him— not even asked, just let him continue, because he was doing pretty good by himself. What's your argument?

**ORGANIZER**: You can never do for someone what they can do for

themselves.

**CORTES**: Oh, okay, all right. Why don't you go ahead?

**CORTES**: Well, how do you begin to get people to come together? Well, you can't do it around some sort of charismatic personality, because that's really not very inimical to their development, okay? You create— I mean, you have to depend upon that charismatic personality, and I'm not that charismatic, anyway, so I don't want to *[crosstalk]*.

**MOYERS**: But that is a problem with, say, a Jesse Jackson, who's very charismatic, leaves no organization behind him.

**CORTES**: That's correct. That's correct.

**MOYERS**: Except a political organization every four years that comes to—

**CORTES**: And is organized around him, okay? So there's no— there is no indigenous— there is no self-sustaining mechanism for building a collective leadership, for maintaining a collective leadership as there is, I think, developing in COPS or in Valley Interfaith or in some of the other— UNO and et cetera, some of the other *[crosstalk]*.

**MOYERS**: So you're trying to make yourself obsolescent.

**CORTES**: Well, I don't think I'll ever be obsolete. You know, the world's greatest organizers, Moses and Paul, always seemed to have work to do.

**MOYERS**: Moses?

**CORTES**: Oh, sure. Moses took a divided people, a people who were a mixed multitude, a people who was cowed, people who were from Sinai and people from Egypt and people from all kinds of different traditions, and taught them how to come together under, you know, the one faith.

**MOYERS**: It took him 40 years to get them out of the wilderness.

**CORTES**: Well, you know, you've got to be patient in this business.

**MOYERS**: And they wanted to go back.

**CORTES**: Of course they do. They fleshpots are always— it's always— the greatest— every organizer, every political leader should read Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, the chapter on the Grand Inquisitor, which talks about, you know, Christ coming back to earth during a *[unintelligible]* and being confronted, you know, immediately spotted by the Grand Inquisitor, who immediately has him thrown in the dungeon, okay? And he comes in the dead of night and says, "Why did you come back? We tried it your way, and it didn't work. We tried freedom. It doesn't— people don't want to be free. They want bread. They want to be dependent."

Now, I don't believe the Grand Inquisitor was right, but I think we have to deal with that challenge. There is that part of us which doesn't— which wants to be led.

**MOYERS**: We left Moses back there in the wilderness—

**CORTES**: I'm sorry, yeah.

**MOYERS**: —remember, we left him back there in the wilderness, we've got to get him out of there. What was it that made him such a unique organizer, in your pantheon? He certainly had some good help from upstairs.

**CORTES**: Well, yes. The most— to me, the most important story in



the story of Moses is the burning bush, and what that meant.

**MOYERS**: There is that wonderful moment, which is a key insight for me in your own work, where Moses wants to take all the burden. He says, "I can't handle this burden, I just can't do it." But God says to him, remember—

**CORTES**: Oh, the tent of the presence. That's a great story. We use this in training. The Bell Organization, one of our organizations, developed this paper called the tent of the presence.

**MOYERS**: The what?

**CORTES**: The tent of the presence.

**MOYERS**: The tent of the presence, right.

**CORTES**: It's the story of Moses, you know, is confronted by the people, you know, they want meat to eat, they're tired of all this manna, okay? And they say, "We wish that we were back in Egypt, where we had garlic and leeks and cucumbers." And Moses, in anguish, confronts God and says, you know, "Why do you treat me so badly? Where am I going to get meat for all these people?" Okay. "Am I a wet nurse that I've— you know, I've got to carry them on my breast?" And God says to Moses, "Moses, I have taught you how to do it. Gather together all the leaders of the people, the 70 elders, the people that you know," and emphasize the word know, the people that you've tested out and you've checked out. "Bring them together, and take the burden that's on you. Don't be a charismatic leader. Don't think that you're going to solve all their problems. Put it on them. Agitate them. You want meat to eat? Go out and organize— there's some quail over there. Go out and organize hunting parties. Go get it."

And Moses still doesn't- he still doesn't buy it, he says, "Where am I going to get meat?"

Now, what's great about the story, which most people don't see, or at least maybe this is my own peculiar way of looking at the world, is the humor. Because Moses— how do we know about this story? We know about it because Moses is telling the story about himself, and because he's got this great perspective on himself, this great sense of humor, this distance. He's not thin-skinned, like, unfortunately, some of our— even our best politicians, okay? They can't take— they can't learn from their mistakes. They can't be critiqued. They've got to always look good. They become tinsel personalities. There is— that's one of the things we need to teach people, is how to— not only to critique, but also to be critiqued.

**MOYERS**: To be critiqued, yeah.

**CORTES**: How to be vulnerable a little bit.

**MOYERS**: What's your biggest success in the last 15 years? Have you won a big one?

**CORTES**: Yeah, we won three big ones. I guess the one that I'm the proudest of, because everybody said it was impossible, it couldn't be done, was to get the state legislature in Texas to vote $100 million worth of general obligation bonds to provide water and sewer services to what they call colonias, unincorporated areas outside of cities along the border.

**3rd WOMAN**: *[through interpreter]* The most important thing is

that our children now have water, and our kids now can take a bath so they can go to school clean. They have drainage now and there aren't so many microbes.

**CORTES**: Because it was a real self-help deal. I mean, the colonia residents were going to pay— were going to have to— were going to pay through their utility bills for these capital improvements. So it was not a giveaway, from their point of view, although there was some state money that had to be appropriated.

**3rd WOMAN**: *[through interpreter]* It's very interesting—

**CORTES**: Very interesting.

**3rd WOMAN**: Because there are no more outhouses here. It smells good now.

**CORTES**: But now those same people are looking at public school finance in the state of Texas. They're looking at what kind of tax system we're going to have in Texas, whether or not we go to a state income tax, corporate and personal, you know, and how we— whether or not we finance educational expenditures with that kind of tax.

**MOYERS**: Exactly what are you trying to do when you teach these people, from housewives to reverends, to preachers and pastors and nuns, why so many— why the churches?

**CORTES**: Because the church is an important mediating institution. The church is an institution which enables people to develop meaning and values and almost every church has a powerful statement about the role it has to play in public life. And of course, in our own history, churches have always been central to the major changes from the great awakening, its relationship to the American revolution, the abolitionist movement, the women's movement, the civil rights movement. I mean, almost all— any significant, you know, social change in the United States has always been centered in— or at least the beginnings of it, you know, the development of the idea, the incubus for it has been in churches and people of— who have values and who have visions.

**MOYERS**: But the cliche is the separation of church and state.

**CORTES**: Yes, it says that the church— there shall be no dominant church, there shall be no established church. But it doesn't say that churches can't be involved in public life or that church leaders can't be involved in public life. It says there should be no established church, that Congress shall make no law establishing a church, a dominant church. At least that's my understanding of the Constitution. I may be in error.

**MOYERS**: What's peculiar or particular about the people you are training here and the church? What is it they know, or what is it they want to know that makes them so useful in organizing?

**CORTES**: Well, one of the most important aspects or distinctiveness about them, they care deeply about cities. They care deeply about cities as a place where people come together and enter into relationships and where people— families are raised, and children are mentored and old people are cared for. And they see cities all over the country, in some places in other countries as well, as having very great difficulties in times of great troubles. The economies of cities are, you know, are in great disrepair, the infrastructure of cities.



There's urban violence, there's drugs, there's gang violence. None of these things are conducive to families developing and growing and nurturing, and they're concerned about families as well. And they see that there's all kinds of pressures on families, economic pressures, cultural pressures, and that somehow there has to be some strategy.

**MOYERS**: Some of your critics say that you're actually too conservative, that instead of trying to change the institutions which for so long have been dominating the lives of the people you're trying to help organize, you're bringing people into existing institutions, more people into existing institutions that are ossified and out of date.

**CORTES**: Well, I've very seldom been privileged to be called too conservative, but I guess—

**MOYERS**: Usually it's the right wing that's speaking and saying you're too radical.

**CORTES**: —usually it's the right wing, too radical. But I guess this— in some ways, you know, we are about, culturally, a conservative strategy. We think that it's important for people to be connected to institutions. And I do think that there needs to be a revitalization of churches and families and I don't— if you say I'm conservative because I think the family is important, I say I plead guilty. If you say I'm conservative because I think the church is important, I plead guilty. If you can say I'm conservative because I think communities are important, I plead guilty. If you say I'm conservative because I think the educational system could be— the public school could be developed, could be made to work and to function, then I plead guilty. If you say I'm conservative because I believe American can work, then I plead guilty as well.

**MOYERS**: You believe America can work.

**CORTES**: Yes, I do.

**MOYERS**: I don't see much evidence over the last 15 years that the poor are a lot better off than they were when you began organizing.

**CORTES**: I don't think there's any question that we've got some serious problems. In my own city, in San Antonio, there's been some— ample studies demonstrating that, over the last 10 years, people are getting poorer. We're dealing with some very powerful global economic forces, okay? We're dealing with some very powerful and somewhat mean-spirited political forces in this country. And Texas is in a serious difficulty, crossroads. We are almost like a Third World economy. We've depended upon, you know, extracted industries — oil, gas, cotton, livestock, et cetera, defense, real estate, financial institutions — all those are in serious difficulty. We've had a depression, virtually, or recession since '83. We need to revitalize our public schools. We need to become— we need to reorganize our economy so that we can deal with, you know, the global economy, connect it to a global economy, to think about exports to the rest of the world rather than depend on things like tourism, et cetera.

**MOYERS**: I traveled the country 20 years ago and wrote a book, and in one chapter I said, having been down in south Texas, that the decade of the Chicano has arrived. I was either wrong or very premature. That was 1970.

**CORTES**: Yeah. I wrote a— I was interviewed by *The L.A. Times*

and I said that unless Hispanics, Latinos learn about power and about politics, that the decade of the Chicano is going to be so many beer commercials. And you're right, but a little premature, I think.

I think it's going to come, but it's going to come when Hispanics, Chicanos, Mexicanos, Latinos, whatever you want to— one of the problems I have is until somebody asked me to give a talk on the Hispanic perspective, and I said I have a difficulty in that because I've only been one for five years, all my life I was a Mexican.

But at any rate, it's going to come when we understand that it can't be an individual thing, okay? It's not going to depend upon whether or not we have, you know, great leaders, whether it's a Henry Cisneros or Cesar Chavez or *[unintelligible]* or Willie Velasquez, all of whom are, you know, extraordinary people. It's going to come when we develop a civic culture, when we develop institutions, when we develop a reservoir of talent, and it's going to come when we recognize that we not only have to— well, that we're part owners, you know, of what takes place, that we can't just expect things. We also have to offer ideas and solutions and strategies.

But we also have to recognize that we can't just depend upon the public sector or— that's not a really good term, but we can't depend upon the government, you know, for solutions. We have to also have some sort of, you know, we need institutions of society, we need families, we need communities. And I guess, getting back to your original question, I am conservative in that respect. I think we have to rebuild those mediating institutions.

**MOYERS**: *[voice-over]* This has been the first part of a conversation with Ernie Cortes. I'm Bill Moyers.



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2/18/90 #204 **Jonas Salk** (Mr. Salk is the developer of the polio vaccine and the founder of the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California. He talks about AIDS research and how the technique of "negotiating" with the AIDS virus offers a way of thinking about human beings as "part of, not apart from" nature.

2/25/90 #205 **Maxine Hong Kingston — Part I** (Author of *The Warrior Woman, China Men*, and *Tripmaster Money*. Ms. Kingston offers new images of America as a "melting pot" where the dutiful notions of the Puritans blend with the Monkey Spirit of the Orient to produce a new American consciousness.

3/4/90 #206 **Maxine Hong Kingston — Part II**

3/11/90 #207 **Toni Morrison — Part I** (Author of *Song of Solomon* and Pulitizer-Prize winning *Beloved*; and is also an editor and teacher.

3/18/90 #208 **Peter Sellars — Part I** (Mr. Sellars discusses his controversial career as a theatre director; he has been director of the Boston Shakespeare Company and the American National Theatre Company at the Kennedy Center. Presently, at age thirty-two, he is director the Los Angeles Festival.

3/25/90 #209 **Peter Sellars — Part II** (Mr. Sellars discusses his views on the future of Los Angeles and its art world.)

4/1/90 #210 **Cornel West** (Professor or Religion and director of Afro-American Studies at Princeton University, talks about religion, rap music and the crisis of black leadership.)

4/15/90 #211 **Steven Rockefeller** (Philosopher and educator at Middlebury College in Vermont discusses spiritual democracy.

4/22/90 #212 **Mike Rose** (Author of *Lives on the Boundary* and associated director of Writing Programs at UCLA.)

4/29/90 #213 **Seymour Melman** (Professor Emeritus of Industrial Engineering at Columbia University and Chair of the National Commission for Economic Converstion and Disarmament.

5/6/90 #214 **Evelyn Fox Keller** (Theoretical physicist in the Department of Rhetoric at the University of California at Berkeley.

5/13/90 #215 **Joanne Ciulla** (Teacher of Business Ethics and Management at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.

5/20/90 #216 **Michael Sandel** (Professor of Political Philosophy at Harvard University's Department of Government.

5/27/90 #217 **Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris** (Louise Erdrich is author of the novels, *Love Medicine* and *The Beet Queen*, and the book of poems, *Baptism of Desire*; Michael Dorris is the winner of the 1989 National Book Critics Circle Award for his book, *The Broken Chord*. Featured together in this new episode, the Native American authors are also husband and wife.

6/3/90 #218 **Bharati Mukherjee** (Indian author and teacher; winner of the 1988 National Book Critics Circle Award for her book of short stories, *The Middleman*, and author of the novel, *Jasmine*; teacher at the University of California at Berkeley.

6/10/90 #219 **William L. Shirer: Part I** (Historian, author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and most recenlty *A Native's Return: 1945-1988*, the third volume his three-part memoir, *The Twentieth Century Journey*.

6/17/90 #220 **William L. Shirer: Part II**

6/23/90 #221 **Jacob Needleman** (Professor of Philosophy at San Francisco State University and Director of the Center for the Study of New Religions at the Graduate