

José Martí

FORGER OF PEOPLES







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Edición: SILVIA AGUILA FONSECA Y MAIA BARREDA SÁNCHEZ
Corrección: REGINA ARANGO ECHEVARRÍA
Diseño de cubierta: RAYMUNDO GUERRERO MARRERO
Diseño interior: ILEANA FERNÁNDEZ ALFONSO
Composición: ALINA FUENTE HERNÁNDEZ

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CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS MARTIANOS
Calzada 807, esquina a 4,
El Vedado, CP 10400,
La Habana, Cuba
Telf.: (53) 7 836 4966 al 69
Fax: (53) 7 833 3721
E-mail: cem@josemarti.co.cu
editorial@josemarti.co.cu
www.josemarti.cu

The Cuban José Martí (1853-1895), whose father and mother had been born in the Spanish Valencia and Canary Islands, is regarded as one of the most important thinkers of the American continent. His revolutionary social ideas, the depth of his anti-colonialist conceptions and his uninterrupted struggle to attain, not only the most absolute political independence, but also the economic and cultural non-dependence for the totality of Ibero-America, grant his thoughts a surprisingly permanent value, even for the analysis and search of solutions to many of the problems faced by humanity still today on the very eve of the 21st century.

On the other hand, his extremely valuable and vast literary production has made him one of the major representatives of Spanish literature in the second half of the past century, earning him the qualification of the “most relevant cultural event in Latin America during the 19th century.”

José Martí’s ideas follow and develop those of Simón Bolívar and other patriots of the struggles for the independence in the Spanish America. His political action is marked by an ever-present sense of ethics and social justice. In Martí these characteristics are definitely and inseparably united to the defense and replevin of those classes most dispossessed and humble of the countries south of the American continent, and also serve as a very firm basis for a sustained defense without relinquishment of their peoples’ national and cultural independence.


Since his adolescent years, José Martí started in the Cuban colony a long struggle for independence that led him immediately to political




imprisonment, forced work in jail and an exile of more than two decades which began when he was 17 years of age and extended in fact to the very end of his brief but intense life.


Initially deported to Spain (where he remained from 1871 until 1874), Martí was able to study at the Faculty of Law of the Central University of Madrid, at the Institute in Zaragoza and the University in that city, where he obtained the degrees of Bachelor and Lawyer in both Civil and Canonical Law, as well as Bachelor in Philosophy and Literature.

His vital experience facilitated the direct knowledge of the reality of the American continent. In Mexico (where he lived during 1875 and 1876) he became outstanding as a journalist and profound analyst of the Mexican society and characteristics of the former Spanish America. During 1877 and 1878 he resided in Guatemala: there he worked as a university professor and secondary school teacher. Later —and only once after his





deportation— he established himself in Havana for a few months, until in 1879 he was again deported to Spain for conspiring in the organization of a new stage in the war fought by Cuba for its national liberation. In 1880 he lived for some months in New York and during the first half of 1881 he established himself in Caracas. That same year he settled down definitively in the United States, where he continued working in the reorganization of the Cuban independentist forces. Because of his intense political and educational work among the widest sectors of both Cuban and Puerto Rican immigrants —particularly the Afro Cubans who were part of the revolutionary immigration established in New York— his fellow citizens granted him the honorable titles of Apostle and Maestro which continued to be used by his people to name him in Cuba, the Antilles and Latin America after his death and even up to our day.





A few weeks after February 1895, when the revolutionary war was restarted to achieve the independence of Cuba and support Puerto Rico in its struggle, José Martí landed at the eastern end of the country with a small expedition coming from another ever-solidary Antillean country: the neighboring Dominican Republic. Weeks later, on May 19, he fell at the combat of Dos Ríos, culminating a life in which his well-defined standing at the side of the humble and dispossessed had played a determinant role in his Caribbean fatherland and remaining countries of Latin American.




When he died at 42, José Martí, a true forerunner with a surprisingly anticipated vision, had penetrated the economic and social realities of the American continent and become aware of the dangers that already threatened its southern part. He had also been able to warn his contemporaries about:

1. The need for Latin American and Caribbean countries to achieve their



own development by autochthonous means resulting from their own social, political and economic realities, without imitating or copying foreign formulas nor following road such as the one historically achieved by the society of the United States, which had made José Martí declare as early as December 1870, even before his first deportation to Spain:

The American laws have granted the North a high degree of prosperity, and have also raised it to the highest degree of corruption. They have metallized it to make it prosperous. Cursed be prosperity at such high cost!


2. The urgency of developing a firm resistance to the economic penetration of Latin America by the United States, and with this purpose he timely denounced the different mechanisms of penetration and economic dominion that began to





appear and were being used by the United States expansionist in form of agreements and treaties of reciprocity signed in those days, which he systematically detected. He had defined that in Latin America, in spite of the alleged political independence and of having attained the republican condition, “the colony continued to live in the republic,” and in order to stop that penetration, the Latin American republics should eliminate those productive structures they had been dragging since the years of colonial dependency: they were not only at the basis of the most difficult social problems of those countries, but also generated constant dependency. And therefore “it is urgent to say, because it is the truth, that the time has come for the Spanish America to declare its second independence.”



3. The need of a strategic union of the Ibero-American and Caribbean peoples:






“It is necessary to bring together what in the end will come together.” This claim became an urgent dramatic call for unity and joint action when in 1889 the strong expansionist offensive of the newly born United States imperialism appeared with an open, truly uncovered nature, having been called by its name by José Martí and whose chief aspect he was able to determine and describe quite early within the international context at that time.






As a result of it, José Martí elaborated (and proposed in his vast and still not well known written works) a continental strategy for the most authentic, democratic and autochthonous revolutionary transformation of Latin America and of the relations between the two opposite sections —north and south— of the continent.

The first case or moment in carrying out this strategy would be the establishment in Cuba and




Puerto Rico —the last Spanish colonies in America— of two republics with absolute independence, conceived for peace and work. Both one and the other would be organized —according to José Martí’s conceptions— upon the search and discovery of their own solutions to the problems born of their specific national realities, and they would be adjusted to the particular characteristics of their society. In turn, both republics —an addition to serving as a proposal (and not as a model) for the group of Latin American countries— should, if possible, attain the continental strategic goal that ruled José Martí’s life and political action:

to prevent in time, with the independence of Cuba, that the United States expand in Antilles and fall with a greater force upon our lands of America. Everything I did until today and everything I will do is with that purpose. It had to be done in silence, and as indirectly [...]




According to that purpose, Martí, after more than one decade of working in favor of it, had achieved to organize and found in 1892 the Cuban Revolutionary Party among the revolutionary emigration from the Antillas established in the United States, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Costa Rica, Mexico and other countries of America and Europe; the first political party born without electoral purpose, conceived to organize and conduct an independence war, make a popular revolution and attempt to reach, as major strategical objective, the economic, political and cultural non-dependency for the peoples of Latin America.

In José Martí, his whole action of social transformation and national and continental liberation had a firm and sustained ethical basis (in addition to an economic and social one) that allowed him to convoke the war for the independence of Cuba and Puerto Rico, foster





the integral transformation of the grave situation contemporary to him in the continent, and do so without hatred but with great respect toward the people of those powers whose subordinating presence in Latin American and Caribbean lands Martí sought to prevent or at least hinder.

In the specific case of the people of Spain—as recorded in the programmatic documents of the revolution for independence—it was clear that




There is no hatred in the Antillean chest; and the Cuban greets in death the Spaniard rooted out of his home and his land by the cruelty of compulsory service to come to assassinate in men's chests the liberty he himself longs for. Rather than greeting him in death, the revolution would like to welcome him in life; and the [Cuban] republic will be a tranquil home for as many working and honorable Spaniards enjoy in






it the liberty and goods they still will not find for a long time in the slowness, indolence and political vices of their own country. This is the heart of Cuba, and so will the war be.




For Martí—who in expressing it evidenced the feelings of both Cubans and Puerto Ricans for whose independence he fought—



It is not the birth in Spanish soil that the oppressed Antillean despises in the Spaniard; but the aggressive and insolent occupation of the country where it makes bitter and atrophies the lives of its own children. War is intended against the bad father; [...] against the arrogant and ungrateful passer-by, not against the liberal and grateful worker. The war is not against the greed Spaniard but against the greed and incompetence of Spain.




José Martí's ideas are contained in a vast written work that comprises 27 volumes up to the




present. Political essays such as the transcendent programmatic article entitled “Our America,” newspaper chronicles for relevant publications from Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Mexico City, Caracas, New York or Madrid; articles containing analyses of quite diverse aspects of the political, social, economic and cultural reality of Latin American countries and the United States (i.e., his famous *North American Scenes*), biographical essays and portraits of thinkers, political figures, creators and heroes of both parts of the American continent, Europe and the remotest latitudes —such as India and ancient Vietnam— articles of literary, artistic and scientific critique and the few speeches whose texts have reached our days, make up a very rich and fruitful work of creation that is inseparable of his revolutionary action and of his political and social ideas.

Outstanding in his relevant literary work, which makes him a major figure of the Spanish language in the second half of the 19th century,




are the poem books *Ismaelillo* and *Versos sencillos* and a monthly magazine totally written by him and addressed to the children in Latin America: *La Edad de Oro* (*The Gilded Age*).

Always in search of his goal of finding at each country's national reality the solutions to the social, political and economic problems originated by that reality, José Martí, according to his own words from 1889, sought with that magazine written for the children of the formerly Spanish America to give an impulse to



that which I want to contribute to, which is to fill up our lands with new men, raised to be happy in the land they live in, and to live in accordance with it, neither divorcing it nor living unfruitful in it, as rhetorical citizens or disdainful foreigners born as a penalty at this other part of the world. Manure may be brought from other places, but cultures have to be raised according to the soil. We must raise our children to be men of their times, and men of America.




Martí had understood the particular nature of the American reality, and he knew that “our America comes neither from Rousseau nor from Washington but from itself,” hence he could also denounce the incompetence and impotence of


those who wish to rule new peoples, of a unique and violent composition, with laws inherited from four centuries of free practice in the United States, of nineteen centuries of monarchy in France. A decree from Hamilton does not stop the blow of the farmer’s colt. A phrase by Sieyès does not remove the coagulated blood of the Indian race.

According to Martí


a good governor in America is not one who knows how to rule over the German or the French, but one who knows which elements make up his country, and how he may guide them all together to achieve, with methods and institutions born in the country itself, that desirable state where each man knows




himself and exercises himself, and where all enjoy the plenty that Nature provided for all in the land they fertilize with their work and defend with their lives. The government must be born from the country. The spirit of the government must be that of the country. The government is nothing more than the equilibrium of the natural elements of the country.




And without ignoring, disdain, or underestimating the historical experience accumulated by Humanity, the Cuban revolutionary proposed: “Graft the world in our republics, but the stem must be that of our republics. And may the powerful defeated remain silent, that there is no fatherland in which man may be prouder than in our afflicted American republics.”




It is the same claim for auctochthony that had distinguished his years of journalism in Mexico, when just arrived from his first deportation to Spain he demanded:




A history of one's own demands one's own solutions. Our life demands our laws. Do not tie the Mexican economist servilely to a rule that is dubious even in the country that inspired it. A life is being created here. Conflicts produced by our own very peculiar situation arise here: let original and concrete laws be discussed here, laws that are studied, are applied and are made for our own exclusive and particular need.




Such ideas have been at the base of the revolutionary strategy conceived by José Martí for the whole of the American continent, and of the national liberation war that he organized and prepared for his Cuban fatherland and his Antilles sister, Puerto Rico.




He did it knowing that in that war “we will die for true liberty, not for the liberty that serves as a pretext to maintain some men in excessive delight and others in unnecessary grief.”




And he did it knowing also that republics are not made in one day, nor will Cuba achieve with the simple battles for independence the victory which the human race, in its continual renovations and perpetual struggle between disinterestedness and greed and between liberty and excessive pride, has still not achieved in the whole world.



Such was the support and base upon which the decision of the Cubans of that period was sustained, of going ahead with the fight for the independence and the national liberation of their fatherland, with the purpose “of profiting from liberty in favor of the humble, who are those who have known how to defend it.” With it, Cuba took then and forever one of the most intimate and cherished decisions of that major Antillean who was a true forger of his people.





*With the poor of this earth
I would like to share my fate:
The stream in the mountain ridge
Pleases me more than the sea.*

