

Imperialism and Revolution



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José Martí leads the revolution to its next stage

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By Charles McKelvey

José Martí, the son of Spanish immigrants from Valencia and the Canary Islands, was born in 1853 in Havana. His father worked as a bureaucrat in the Spanish colonial administration. The young Martí was greatly influenced by his teacher, the Cuban patriot Rafael María de Mendive, from whom he learned the teachings of Cuban nationalist thought and its concepts of Cuban independence and the abolition of slavery. Martí was imprisoned in 1869 at the age of 16 for his support of Cuban independence, and he was deported to Spain a year later. He subsequently lived in Madrid, Guatemala, Mexico, and New York City, spending fourteen years in the United States from 1881 to 1895. He died in combat in 1895, shortly after the beginning of the Cuban war of independence.

In this episode, we look at the role of Martí in formulating a new direction of the Cuban revolutionary struggle, bringing it to a more mature stage. The sources that I have used are “El pensamiento de José Martí y la creación del Partido Revolucionario Cubano” (“The thought of José Martí and the creation of the Cuban

Revolutionary Party”) by Ramón de Armas and Pedro Pablo Rodríguez, found in the volume (cited last week) on the History of Cuba published in 1996 by Editora Política in Havana; and “La Revolución del Otro Mundo: Un análisis histórico de la Revolución Cubana” (“The Revolution of the Other World: A historic analysis of the Cuban Revolution”) by Jesús Arboleya, published in 2008 by Editorial de Ciencias Sociales in Havana.

Martí sought to form a common consciousness that would be the basis for a popular democratic revolution by and for all. He envisioned not only independence from colonial Spain but also from the imperialist intentions of the USA. And he envisioned a republic by and for the good of all, regardless of race or class. In reflecting on these issues, he synthesized a wide variety of intellectual and moral tendencies, including naturalism, positivism, and the perspective of the indigenous peoples of Mexico and Central America.

Martí formulated his vision at a time in which conservatism and reformism dominated the public discourse in Cuba. Even in its most progressive expressions, reformism did not advocate independence, much less an independent republic characterized by inclusion and social equality. Thus, what Martí proposed seemed impossible. But Martí believed that the task of Cuban patriots was to make possible the impossible. And this, he maintained, is attained through a commitment to integrity and duty, which involves above all the seeking of truth, thereby overcoming distortions and confusions. For Martí, the delegitimation of the distortions that emerge from colonialism, slavery, and domination constitutes the necessary foundation of a struggle for liberation. He believed that heroes emerge that lead the way, heroes that are dedicated to the “redeeming transformation of the world” through sacrifice and the seeking of truth.

Because of the confusion dominating the public discourse in Cuba as well as restrictions imposed by the colonial situation, Martí focused his efforts on the Cuban émigré community. But even the Cuban emigration was characterized by many divisions: class divisions between the middle class and the factory workers (who were concentrated in tobacco factories in Florida); racist attitudes among white Cubans; various currents of conservative and reformist thought in the middle class; and currents of socialist and anarchist thought that held nationalist patriotic struggles in disdain, which were influential among factory workers. Accordingly, Martí formed the Cuban Revolutionary Party in 1892, with the intention of forging an ideological unity in support of fundamental principles. These principles were the formation of an independent republic not controlled by colonial or imperialist powers; and the development of an inclusive republic by all and for the good of all, regardless of race or class.

Martí was aware that capitalism was entering a phase of monopoly capital, that is, large and concentrated industries and banks, and that this made possible an imperialist penetration by the global powers in nations that are politically independent. Such nations are independent but not sovereign, and Martí, therefore, considered anti-imperialism to be a necessary component of a genuine struggle for national liberation and true sovereignty. He believed that imperialism has a psychological base in disdain for the peoples of the world and an ideological base in the racist belief in the superiority of whites over blacks and of Anglo-Saxons over Latinos. He further believed that the Cuban struggle for national liberation was part of a global struggle against U.S. imperialism that not only would establish the sovereignty of the colonized peoples but also would save the dignity of the people of the United States.

The vision of Martí stood in opposition to powerful interests, including: colonial Spain, dependent on the parasitic revenues generated by the island; the United States, increasingly penetrating economically in Cuba and positioning itself to emerge as a neocolonial power in relation to Latin America; and the Cuban estate bourgeoisie, owners of sugar and coffee plantations in Cuba. The emerging industrial bourgeoisie could support the vision of Martí, to the extent that its economic interests were tied to the vitality of the Cuban domestic market. Recognizing the formidable enemies that such a vision would create, Martí conceived the Cuban Revolutionary Party as a political structure that would unify the popular classes and sectors that had

an interest in the development of the alternative society. These popular classes and sectors included agricultural workers, small farmers, tenant farmers, urban workers, the middle class, blacks and mulattos.

Martí believed that as the popular revolution advanced toward the attainment of its goals, the Cuban national bourgeoisie would join the independence struggle as the best option in defense of its now “diminished interests,” and that it would join in the construction of a society “by all and for the good of all.” In fact, however, the national bourgeoisie actively supported the counterrevolution in the 1890s, and it did not abandon the colonialist cause until 1898, when the military and economic weakness of Spain became evident. Beginning in 1898, many of the Cuban national bourgeoisie incorporated themselves into the US-directed counterrevolution, which sought to contain the popular revolution through the imposition and development of neocolonial structures.

Martí formulated an inclusive vision of the Cuban popular revolution. All of the popular sectors, regardless of race or class, were included in the revolutionary process and its benefits; even the Cuban national bourgeoisie was invited, as individuals and as a class, insofar as they accepted the vision of building a society for the good of all. The Marxist formulation, with its emphasis on the industrial working class at the vanguard in opposition to the bourgeoisie and distinct from the middle class, had its logic in the context of Western Europe; but Martí was formulating a concept of popular revolution in a colonial situation, with a potential imperialist neocolonial power looming over it. These different social contexts led to different formulations.

During the course of the twentieth century, Martí’s inclusive vision would shape the revolution. Because of its inclusive orientation, when women’s organization emerged in the 1920s, their participation in the revolution and the inclusion of their fundamental demands was not complicated in ideological terms, given the historic orientation to social and ideological inclusion of the diverse popular sectors. In the early 1960s, Fidel’s strategy with respect to race followed Martí, consistent with the approach of Dr. Martin Luther King in the United States, and at various with black consciousness tendencies that were emerging. Similarly, the subsequent inclusion of the principles of the ecology movement did not confront obstacles. Such that the Cuban Revolution has evolved to be a comprehensive revolution that affirms the principles of various social movements, formulated in an integrated manner on the foundation of an anti-imperialist movement for national sovereignty and against foreign interference. Such comprehensiveness and inclusiveness are among the important legacies of Martí.

This is Charles McKelvey, speaking from Cuba, the heart and soul of a global socialist revolution that struggles for a more just, democratic, and sustainable world.

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