

A brief presentation of José Martí

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As you may know, José Martí is Cuba's national hero. He was born in Havana on January 28, 1853 in a modest Spanish family. From childhood he was gifted with an exceptional sensibility for social justice. His family, teachers and friends perceived in him unusual literary creative powers. He was endowed with qualities we would like all men and women, and indeed our sons and daughters to have. That is why we are doing our best to preserve for future generations the enormous wealth of knowledge, the treasure of documents that he bequeathed us; his overwhelming literary and political achievements, his twenty-eight volumes of essays, articles, poetry, drama, letters and novels, forerunners of modernism, thought to be by the greatest writers and critics of his time and ours among the best written in the Spanish language.

Very early in his youth his sense of solidarity led him to criticize the Spanish colonial regime in Cuba. The few words about the social and political wrongs in Cuba he had written to a friend found their way into a colonial court that sentenced him to six years of hard labor in chains when he was scarcely sixteen years of age. The following year, his sentence commuted, young Martí was deported to the Isle of Pines (today the Isle of Youth) and later to Spain, bearing the scars of prison for the rest of his life. From 1871 to 1874, he studied, first in the Faculty of Law of the Central University of Madrid, and later at the University of Saragossa, where he graduated in Law and Philosophy. He then traveled to Mexico where he lived from 1875 to 1876. In Mexico he became an accomplished journalist, distinguished lecturer and secondary school professor. After the coup staged by General Porfirio Díaz, of whom he was highly critical, he could no longer stay in Mexico. From 1877 to 1878 he lived in Guatemala. He was employed there as a secondary school teacher and university professor. Once more he clashed with the local government and had to leave. He then decided to return to Cuba. And again he was deported to Spain for his involvement in a new attempt to revive the the Ten Year War (1868-1878). He was losing time in Madrid, so he left for New York, lived there for a few months with his wife, a Cuban lady of a well to do family that he had met and married in Mexico, mother of his only son, and finally settled in Venezuela. This time he was employed as a journalist for the Venezuelan paper *La Opinión Nacional* and as editor of the Venezuelan review *La Revista Venezolana*. Once more he was a university professor of Philosophy. His revolutionary views were not shared by President General Antonio Guzmán Blanco, so he was invited to leave the country. By this time he had a clear idea of the kind of government he did not want for a future independent Cuba.

And so in 1881 he finally took up his permanent residence in New York. In the fourteen years that followed he would live there and pursue his true political call as leader of the Cuban revolution. He was employed in several commercial firms but he was finally accepted as a correspondent to the Argentine journal *La Nación* of Buenos Aires., and his friends in Mexico also managed to find a job for him as correspondent for the Mexican newspaper *El Partido Liberal*. His new jobs required a thorough knowledge of English and a detailed study of American society. This became one of his prime objectives demanding total dedication. After his life in colonial Cuba, Spain, Mexico, Guatemala and Venezuela, the United States seemed to him a haven with the kind of liberty he longed for. But this joy did not last long. The assassination of President Garfield in 1881, the obvious evidence that went beyond his murderer and led to those highly placed members of his own party who would benefit from his death; the exploitation of workers, the myriads of destitute in the city, the misery of the German, Italian, Irish, Scandinavian and even Chinese immigrants; the high degree of corruption in the political system and government, the emergence of cartels and monopolies that polluted all aspects of American society, and the ever present greed as chief motivation in life, it all disappointed him and made him conclude that United States society, its government and institutions would have to be ignored as a model for an independent Cuba. In this too he coincided with Simon Bolívar, who once said he preferred the Koran to American social and government institutions. Following his increasing experience in US social and political life, he actively participated in the International American Conference of 1889-1890 and was subsequently designated Consul of Uruguay, Paraguay and Argentina, very important posts to which he resigned in October 1891 in order to finalize his plans for what he called “the necessary war”. On May 19 1895 he died in battle in Cuba.

Finally, Martí’s political legacy could be summarized as follows:

- The necessity of strategic unity of Hispanic American countries, both in South America and the Caribbean, as Bolívar had foreseen. To this end Martí said there was need “to bring together that which in the end will come together”. This was a well learned lesson that our present political leadership owes to José Martí, and that became a basis for continental strategy to counter US expansion and power.
- Closely linked to the previous point was the need to reject the economic penetration and subsequent control by the United States of a united Hispanic America. This objective required an active policy of industrial development that would eliminate all traces of a backward colonial economy, responsible for destitution, social unrest and neocolonial dependency.

- Such a process would have to emerge from the country's own means and social, economic and political national realities, without abject imitation of foreign, mainly United States solutions and formulas.
- This meant that a liberated Cuba, accompanied by Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo would have to battle intensively to maintain their hard won independence, perhaps assisted by Europe interested in the natural wealth of the islands and their trade potential, in addition to their geo-strategic value.
- This would have forced the United States to a long pause to negotiate with three independent states, supported by Germany and Britain, and to rethink its planned expansion to the South of the continent and the Pacific. And the result would perhaps have been a new world balance of power that would enable these new born republics to survive American emergent imperialism.
- But this did not occur. It is always painful to remember that Martí never reached his goal. His death in 1895 and that of General Antonio Maceo in 1896, at the very beginning of the war; US intervention in the hostilities and its subsequent victory over Spain, not to mention the complicity of annexationists infiltrated in the new government of Cuba, all the hope for a truly independent nation vanished, and so did Martí's dream of a new world balance of power. But the seed of liberty, of justice and solidarity had been sown. Martí justly said "I will die, but my ideas will survive". And so they did, and a new generation took the flag from Martí's hands, liberated the country in 1959 and recovered its dignity, and has kept the national flag flying over Cuba more than fifty years, ninety miles away from the most powerful empire the world has known.
- It is incredible that in a short life of 42 years, Martí accomplished so much, both in the field of creative writing and journalism and political emancipation. As such he wrote more than four hundred articles and chronicles in newspapers from Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Mexico City, Caracas and of course Madrid, New York and Havana, analyzing the social, economic and cultural reality of Latin America, Europe, the United States, including Asia and even the Arab world. Of these, nearly three hundred described what took place in the United States, and delved deep into its causes, not excluding day to day stories of human interest. But his works also include many biographical essays and literary portraits of thinkers, important politicians, artists and heroes of the two Americas, Europe and the rest of the world. He produced twenty-eight volumes of essays, poetry, drama, letters and novels, forerunners of modernism, thought to be outstanding in the history of Hispanic American literature. Let me show you an example of Martí's journalism applied to a rebellion in Egypt against England, when he was writing for *La Opinión Nacional*, Caracas, on September 16, 1881:

“It is not a simple piece of news, but a grave event that moves Europe, shakes Africa, and involves great interest for those who wish to understand human interest,— the latest Egyptian revolt.—totally victorious, military and specific in appearance, and in reality social and religious.

The problem is one, briefly stated: there is a tendency to the emergence of a great Muslim league, and the suppression of European power in Arab lands. The Muslim wave began in Constantinople at the end of the Middle Ages, invaded the Isthmus, arrived in Tripoli and agitates Tunis where it was stopped, not evaporated.

England and France have defeated Egypt: its representatives manipulate, in agreement with the *jedive*, and representing the guarantee for Egyptian bond holders in Europe, the weakened Egyptian treasury. [...] Suddenly a formidable movement begins due to an order for a change of headquarters for an army regiment, given precisely to prevent the mutiny that was anticipated. The mutiny is victorious; the so called European ministry has disappeared: the prime minister that the mutiny had insisted on has replaced the expelled prime minister. Victory has been overpowering and quick for the national party. This group, representing the Egyptian army, a winner in all attempts, obediently accepts anything that comes from Turkey; but it resisted, as if fifteen thousand men could share the same feelings, any European intervention; and above all any British intervention. Although twenty months of pay is owed to them, they have not rebelled for pay. Although they love their *jedive*, they have risen against him, they have acted and spoken as the king of Aragon, who one by one were worth as much as the king, and all together were worth more than the king.

The mutiny was like an invasion of the sea. It was headed by a robust colonel, with great popularity, full of the Egyptian spirit, Muslim and independent; experienced in handling weapons and the organization of military encampments: Achmet Arabi Bajá.

—“! Let that government fall, that is selling us to Britain; give us a Constitution that will guarantee control to the Egyptians of the Egyptian government; increase the army to 18,000 strong! — Either you grant this immediately, or we will occupy the Viceroy’s palace”.

Counseled by his ministers and advisors he appeared before the rebels, in battle array.

—What do you want, Arabi?

Arabi, mounted in a superb horse, brandishing the naked steel, answers, surrounded by a brilliant group of rebel officers:

— We want law and justice. If you give it to us, you own us. If not, your successor is ready.

Foreign correspondents, specially those of British papers, ask:

—Are Europeans safe in Egypt?

—I will not touch a single of their hairs— unless they land christian troops in our country-

—And if they do?

— A general slaughter of Europeans will follow, -- answered Achmet in a courteous manner.

— And if Turks land?

— Turks are Muslims.

—But, what is the strength of this movement?

— Fifteen thousand Egyptian soldiers, armed with Remingtons; six Krupp batteries; and 150,000 armed bedouins.

— [...] And what is your strength to resist all of Europe?

— A million men.

[...] For Europe, this is a temporary arrangement. The problem is vital and severe: for Egypt, heady and rebellious like its horses, it is a problem of life; for England, whose existence depends of its colonies, of which Egypt is its main artery, it is a capital problem. Neither England can yield, nor Egypt wants to yield. The national movement, impatient and strong, presents battle, that England, unprepared and surprised cannot accept and chooses to delay. Strengthened by that fear and their victory of past days, and the general spirit of the Arab community, and the tacit applause of Turkey, the national party will press on the battle for the same reasons that England does not wish it. Either she will abandon its power in Asia, or it will intervene with a powerful army, in agreement with France [...] So there stands the problem: the British anchor sticking in the flanks of the Egyptian horse: the Coran will wage a battle against the Major Book (Bible): the spirit of trade tries to suppress the spirit of independence: the son of the desert bites the whip and breaks the hand of the greedy son of the Old Continent".¹

I hope I have succeeded in illustrating Martí's journalistic style and his sympathies for the just cause of colonized countries, in this case Egypt, against western countries such as France and England.

¹ José Martí, *La Opinión Nacional*, Caracas, September 16, 1881, in *Complete Works*, vol. 14, p. 113.