

■ *See also*

Cuban Thought and Cultural Identity: Populism, Nationalism, and Cubanía

José Martí: Exile in New York

José Martí: Writings for and about Children

Spanish-American-Cuban War: 1898

Ten Years' War: 1868–1878

Versos sencillos (José Martí)

JOSÉ MARTÍ: POLITICAL ESSAYS

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The experiences and writings that defined the political ideology of one of Cuba's foremost patriots.

After the failure of the Ten Years' War (1868–1878) and the Little War (1879–1880), the Cuban patriot forces suffered deep divisions, and their most prominent leaders went into exile. In Cuba, the colonial Spanish government authorized the existence of political parties. The Liberal Autonomist Party supported the goal of autonomy under Spanish sovereignty and tended to capitalize on nationalist sentiment. It systematically prevented access to the colonial government; that was solidly controlled by the Constitutional Union Party, which favored keeping Cuba fully under the Spanish monarchy.

The island underwent a profound economic and social transformation in which the merchants, money lenders, and slave suppliers used their capital to take over the sugar industry and mechanize it, eliminating the old planters and forming large factories called *centrales*. These interests accepted the abolition of slavery, which finally came in 1886, and directed a large part of Cuban exports of crude sugar and leaf tobacco—both raw materials—to the United States. The country moved toward giant sugarcane plantations, a one-crop economy, and a single market, signs that pointed to a new dependent relationship with the United States.

Various attempts to renew the armed fight for independence were unsuccessful, mainly because they involved plans designed and executed by emigrants who had little or no contact with the island, and also because of the divisions among the patriot leaders and their failure to offer a plan for the republic to address the demands and needs of the majority.

MARTÍ'S CALL TO REVOLUTION

The young José Martí (1853–1895) was sent to Spain after being sentenced to manual labor for his political ideas. In Spain, he was able to complete his studies in law, philosophy, and religion in 1874 before living in Mexico and Guatemala, where he became a writer and well-known figure in intellectual circles. In 1878, he returned to Havana, the city of his birth. He immediately began to conspire against the colonial government and the following year was again deported to Spain. He escaped to New York, where he joined the Revolutionary Committee that directed the Small War from abroad. When the war ended he lived for six months in Caracas during 1881 then returned to New York, where he lived for most of the rest of his life.

From his first public discourse before Cuban emigrants in 1880, Martí proclaimed the need for a “revolution of reflection,” not of anger, and his conviction that the “people, the grieving mass” are the real leaders of revolutions (Martí 1963–1965, vol. 4, pp. 192–193). Firm in his stance as an advocate of independence, in 1884 he separated from the movement led by the patriot military leader General Máximo Gómez (1836–1905), who appeared to be positioning himself as a *caudillo*, or political-military leader.

After staying away from the political environment of the exile community for several years, Martí returned to the public stage at the end of the 1880s. By that time he was well-known; his poetry and his article about the United States had been published in twenty Latin American journals. His ideas now fully mature, he began to draft a plan of transformation for Cuba, the Caribbean, and all of the Americas. Beginning in 1892, he dedicated the rest of his life to the practical achievement of this plan.

THE CUBAN REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

The political action strategy devised and pursued by Martí required first the unity of the Cuban patriot forces. To achieve this, with support from the emigrant community in New York, he created the Cuban Revolutionary Party in early 1892. The party platform stated that the party's goal was to attain Cuban independence and “to encourage and aid in the independence of Puerto Rico” (Martí 1963–1965, vol. 1, p. 279), the other Spanish colony in the Caribbean at that time. According to its secret bylaws (1963–1965, vol. 1, pp. 281–282), the party was comprised of groups of exiles in base cells called clubs that had been forming since the time of the Ten Years' War. The clubs were voluntarily formed by their members and had only to accept the platform and bylaws of the party. The presidents of all the local clubs made up the party's governing council, and the delegate and treasurer, the party's only officials, were chosen annually by the membership. Martí himself was successively reelected delegate until he was killed in battle in 1895.

Based on the Cuban patriotic tradition and incorporating modern political practices, Martí's party sought to dissolve regional, racial, and class differences, as well as divides between the educated and the uneducated and civil leaders and military leaders. The clubs contributed funds to purchase arms and resources for a renewed armed fight against colonialism.

Martí called this war a war of love, not hate. It was unavoidable because the Spanish government would not make any concessions to Cuban interests, much less allow independence through agreements. Though Martí said that armed warfare was necessary, he insisted that it did not entail hatred for Spaniards and that Spaniards living on the island would continue to have a place in the republic that would be founded after victory. Both the party and the conflict itself, described by Martí as a war “of republican methods

and goals" (1963–1965, vol. 1, p. 279), should move toward creation of the republic, which he frequently referred to as "new." In his numerous references to the republic, Martí also noted the profound changes that he believed would be required in Cuba because of its own developmental needs and in order to avoid repeating the errors committed by other Latin American republics.

"NUESTRA AMERICA"

In January 1891 Martí published in New York and Mexico the essay "Nuestra America" (Our America), later considered one of the key writings of his ideology. In it he roundly criticized the continental republics for maintaining the characteristics they had as colonies and for imposing European and U.S. models without considering a land's own history, traditions, social psychology, and identity: "Hamilton's decree cannot stop the plainsman's pony in mid-bolt. A phrase from Sieyes does not quicken the stagnant blood of the Indian race" (Martí 1963–1965, vol. 6, p. 17). He proposed that the natural man (the Indian, the black, and the peasant), cast aside after separation from Spain, should be valued, and that regional identity should be acknowledged if solutions were to be found. "To know is to decide," he wrote (Martí 1963–1965, vol. 6, p. 18). His support for the native did not mean a return to the pre-Hispanic past or a withdrawal from modernity but rather that a new nation would do well to consider the native element with an open mind and incorporate aspects favorable to "our America."

In "Nuestra America" he also repeated what he had been saying in his writings since the 1880s: that the sovereignty of the people of America was threatened by the increasing power of the United States, which was disdainful of nations it considered weak or backward. According to Martí, monopolies controlled the life of the northern nation, seeking to satisfy their needs for consumer markets and suppliers of raw materials and food. As a modern money-based oligarchy, he said, they had eroded the democratic foundations from which the United States had arisen. These expansionist sectors of the United States would take advantage of the internal weaknesses of Latin American republics caused by their failures to adapt their social and economic models, imposing U.S. control and new domination. Two years before, in 1889 in Washington, D.C., Martí had emphatically denounced the International Conference of American States assembled at the behest of the United States in order to "establish an alliance against Europe" (1963–1965, vol. 6, p. 46). For similar reasons, in his role as representative of Uruguay (he served in New York as consul for Uruguay, Argentina, and Paraguay), before the Monetary Conference of American Republics, Martí opposed the U.S. plan for a common regional currency.

He criticized the fledgling monopolies: "The monopoly is seated, like an implacable giant, at the

door of all the poor" (Martí 1963–1965, vol. 10, p. 84). And he thought that the accelerated formation of monopolies in the United States was distancing the nation from its democratic traditions, creating an *Anglomaniacal* aristocratic class that had to be confronted by the joint action of farmers, workers, small business owners, and free-market capital—the healthy part of the nation, and potential allies in the interests of "our America." This view explains his admiration for American intellectuals such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, whom he appreciated not just for their literary accomplishments, which he made known to Spanish-speaking readers, but also for their antislavery and democratic opinions and their expression of the popular culture of the United States.

Martí saw, then, the relationship between Cuban national circumstances and the new South American and global conditions that were emerging at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Cuban independence—and Puerto Rican independence—were not matters of concern for only the two islands, but events with global reach that would contribute to global balance: "We are balancing the entire world, not just the two islands that we are going to liberate" (Martí 1963–1965, vol. 3, p. 142). For Martí it was essential to impede the expansion of U.S. imperialism to prevent the domination and subordination of Latin America; in his view, Spanish possessions in the Antilles were the first step in the U.S. march on South America.

These objectives of his political strategy were laid out in a letter to a Mexican friend, which remained unfinished because of his death in combat the following day: "What I have done until now and what I will do is for this: to in timely fashion, with the independence of Cuba, prevent the United States from falling upon our American lands with this great force. This had to be done in silence, and indirectly, because there are things that, in order to be achieved, must be done in secret" (Martí 1963–1965, vol. 6, p. 168).

VISION FOR CUBA AND LATIN AMERICA

Martí spent the last three years of his life tirelessly spreading his ideas among his followers through speeches, party documents, personal letters, circulars, and numerous writings printed in *Patria*, a newspaper he published in New York. At the same time, he organized the Cuban Revolutionary Party, fostered a vast conspiratorial network within Cuba, and gathered resources to send expeditions to the island to hasten a quick victory in order to avoid both enormous losses of life and property and the interference of the U.S. government.

The great task of unifying the patriots meant confronting the caudillo and regionalist elements in the Cuban social psychology and political culture of the time, as well as the racism against blacks and mulattos based on centuries of slavery that had been incited under colonialism to terrorize the white population

José Martí
(1853–1895). This
monument to Cuban
scholar and national
hero José Martí stands
in the main square of
Matanzas. HÉCTOR
DELGADO AND ROLANDO
PUJOL



with the threat of vengeful insurrections. Aware of the effects of the years of slavery and discrimination, Martí insistently fought the notion of racial superiority and inferiority, affirming that “there are no races; there is only the different modifications of man, in details of habit and form that do not change what is equal and essential, according to the climate and history in which he lives” (Martí 1963–1965, vol. 28, p. 290). Therefore, the Cuban republic had to offer full justice to black and mulatto Cubans who had suffered from racism.

In Martí’s plan, the free republic in Cuba would be a nation of peace, work, and equality, achieved through the implementation of a social and economic plan that envisioned a large class of peasant landowners, suppliers of abundant food and raw materials to spark industrial development on an agricultural base. Foreign trade would be expanded to the largest possible number of nations and would no longer depend on just one or two products (as was the case with raw sugar and leaf tobacco). A strong sense of homeland and knowledge and defense of local identity would have to be sustained through modern education, which would emphasize science without neglecting spiritual development and individuality. Education would combine study with work, both to avoid elitist upbringing and to maintain harmony with the needs and characteristics of society.

Understanding the modern class struggle inherent in industrial capitalism (which he had denounced in his stories about the United States), Martí believed that a just Cuban republic free of the dominance of caste oligarchy could lead to united action with a free Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, and perhaps even Haiti. Such Caribbean unity would make more feasible the union of all the peoples of Latin America, which was desirable and necessary because of the commercial and territorial expansion of the United States. Thus he proclaimed in “Nuestra America,” “We must move forward in close ranks, like silver in the veins of the Andes” (Martí 1963–1965, vol. 6, p. 16).

It is no accident, then, that in outlining the goals of the new struggle in his Montecristi Manifesto, Martí wrote that it “is a far-reaching human event and a timely service that the judicious heroism of the Antilles lends to the stability and just interaction of the American nations and to the still unsteady equilibrium of the world” (Martí 1963–1965, vol. 4, p. 101).

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