

José Martí and Henry George

by *Bill Batt*

An opportunity arose this past June to join an educational visit to Cuba under the sponsorship of *The Nation* magazine. For eight days some 24 subscribers and staff of this weekly had an extraordinary entrée to political insiders, academics and journalists. Cuba is experiencing a socio-political transformation, and there is good reason to believe that the veneration of José Martí can be linked with interest in Henry George.

I had only a vague notion of José Martí before arriving in Havana. He is best known in the US today by Pete Seeger's rendition of his words in the song *Guantanamera*. In Cuba, he is everywhere! Shortly after landing at José Martí International Airport, and checking into the Parque Central Hotel, I walked out to see Martí's statue in a park right across the street. The atrium of the hotel had a wall of photos along with his bust — which also appears on Cuban peso notes. And we would soon see Martí's bust again in the Museum of the Revolution, and then at the Plaza of the Revolution — Cuba's equivalent of "Red Square."



I later found out that there are numerous other busts, portraits, buildings, street names, and memorials in cities where Cuban-American populations have settled. The corner of New York's Central Park and Avenue of the Americas has a powerful larger-than-life casting of Martí, just when mortally wounded, on his horse. It was given to the city in 1959 by noted sculptor Anna Hyatt Huntington, but not placed until 1965 due to the protests of expatriate Cubans. Martí is celebrated by many different elements of Cuban society — initially as the symbol of Cuba's national liberation from Spain, but later from dominance by American corporate interests. Even some anti-Castro expatriates hold up Martí as their champion. Martí's meaning is an ongoing struggle. Perhaps for this reason, when the Cuban filmmaker Fernando Pérez dramatized his

life in his 2010 work, *José Martí: el Ojo del Canario*(The Eye of the Canary), it focused on his youthful education and evaded any exploration of his thought and ideas.

He was most of all a Cuban nationalist, even though he spent very little of his life in the country of his birth. He was sentenced to prison in 1870 as a teenager for six years' hard labor after writing an intemperate letter criticizing a friend who had enlisted in the Spanish army. After the successful intercession of his parents, he went to Spain, and then to France, bearing physical scars on his legs as a lifelong reminder of his prison time. He returned to Cuba in 1877, but soon left for Mexico and Guatemala for two years where his safety was more assured, and then for New York where he would spend the next fifteen years of his life. In 1895 he returned home, and was soon killed in Santiago at the battle of Dos Rios.

Martí was well-educated and widely read; he was well versed in all the ideas of his time, including the major currents of political economy. He read and understood Marx, though he seldom spoke of him, but he “alludes to George dozens of times throughout his work, always admiringly.” (1)

Upon coming to the United States in 1880, Martí was in awe of what he observed. He became less enamored of American society as he grew to understand the growing power of industries and monopolistic trusts. Early in his American life, perhaps in 1882, he wrote

We are at the height of a struggle between capitalists and workers. The first can count on bank credit, funds expected from their debtors, payment of bills on fixed dates, and knowing where they stand at the end of the year. For the workers there is the daily reckoning, the urgent needs that cannot be postponed, the wife and child who eat in the evening what the poor husband worked for in the morning. And the comfortable capitalist compels the poor worker to work at a ruinous wage.

In the course of his fifteen years in New York, his first focus was always on Cuba. He looked at the United States as an outsider, seeking to find answers to the problems he witnessed and to build a political-socio-economic philosophy. “The genuine man,” he wrote, “always goes to the roots. That is what it means to be a radical. Let no man call himself a radical that does not go to the bottom of things, and that does not strive for the happiness and safety of all other men.” He became ever more troubled by what he observed and he was especially shaken by the Haymarket massacre. He could never closely ally himself with socialism thereafter.

Despite his considerable body of written work, Martí saw himself first as an activist. He was an exceptional orator and charismatic figure; he worked closely with *La Liga*, an educational society in New York established by a group of black Cubans and Puerto Ricans for the city's Hispanic working class community, and he was instrumental in creating the Cuban Revolutionary Party (PRC). He organized several Cuban liberation clubs from Boston to Florida, reaching out particularly to the cigar workers in Tampa and the Key West. His decision to join in battles as a teenager, and again at 42 when he was killed, was an inspiration to others in the nationalist cause.

Martí frequently expressed his strong views about monopoly in industry and finance, matters of free trade and tariffs and particularly the evils of colonialism. He saw the aggressively covetous attitude that United States maintained toward Cuba, especially in light of its acquisition of Hawaii, the Philippines, and other remote territories. His unfinished last letter to his closest friend, Manuel Mercado, a day before his death, characterized Cuba's northern neighbor as "the monster."

Martí described the acquisition of US land for speculative gain, both by wealthy Europeans and Americans. It frequently involved corrupt bargains with politicians. Writing for the Argentine newspaper *La Nación* once again in 1886, he warned,

As silently as octopuses the great companies of Europe have been spreading their tentacles over the most fertile lands of North America. Countries with vast areas of land must be extremely vigilant! The sooner they begin protecting them, the better; Europe has a large surplus of idle and restless money. A Netherlands company already possesses 4,500,000 acres of the most productive land in New Mexico. An English syndicate has 3,000,000 acres in Texas. And one man, the Marquis of Tweeddale, is owner of 1,750,000 acres of the nation's rich farmland. They bought entire states.... But the Senate has risen in protest, and without a dissenting voice has passed a bill prohibiting future acquisitions of any land in the United States by foreigners.... None but the foreigner who declares his intention of accepting citizenship in the Republic will be able to [buy] land in it....



Portrait of Martí, “the warrior who never took a life,” from the Prosopa Project (www.prosopa.eu). “It is an ecumenical practice, known to all ages and all nations and central to all popular traditions to celebrate certain prominent figures that have fought for justice, liberty and truth as the voices of their people.... We [used] the visual language of greek iconography, as a way to demolish any cultural barriers and illustrate the way heroic archetypes unite and resurrect the peoples of the World.”

Emerging industrial capitalism, as Martí viewed, it was not a suitable model for Cuba, although he was impressed by the wealth that it was able to generate. But he could not accept the socialism of American Marxists (largely German), after seeing the way in which it dehumanized workers. Moreover, he concluded that poor laws and other welfare programs treated merely symptoms and didn't get to the roots of the problem. He wrote a probing critique of Herbert Spencer's “The Future of Slavery” in 1884. This led some to attribute to Martí the views of Herbert Spencer which he merely described. This crude falsification of Martí's thought is used by dissident Cubans to justify their opposition to socialism.

Martí turned then to Henry George, who was equally critical of the exploitation that capitalism wrought. Jorge Ibarra claims that after 1884 Martí had become “broadly sympathetic to the ideas espoused by George.” (2) He would write for the Buenos Aires periodical, *La Nación*, about social reformers — mentioning specifically Louis Post and Terrence Powderly.

These are new saints that walk the world closing doors on hatred. They see the hurricane coming and they channel it using peace as their instrument. Observing that the land has never denied man his needs, they [the reformers] want the land to be administered in such a way that its products are shared equitably among all men....

His short summary of *Progress and Poverty* went as follows:

In this work, which examines the causes of growing poverty in spite of human progress, the essential idea is that the land must belong to the nation. From here, the book derives all the essential reforms. He who works and improves the land should own it. He should pay the state for it while he uses it. Nobody should possess the land without paying the state for using it. Nobody should pay the state a tax beyond a land rental. Thus the weight of national taxes will fall upon those that have received [from the nation] the means of paying them... Life without taxes will be cheap and easy, and the poor will have a home and time to cultivate their minds, understand their civic duties, and love their children.

His high regard for George was particularly evident in Martí's chronicles of the mayoralty campaign of 1886, when George became the champion of the labor party in a three-way race that he almost won but for the corruption of the election process.

Only Darwin in the natural sciences has left on our times a mark comparable to that of George in the social sciences. Darwin's hand appears in politics, history, and poetry; wherever English is spoken, the cherished ideas of George are impressed on the mind with commanding force.... The labor unions cluster around him; to succeed, he tells them, you must educate yourselves! In a nation where suffrage is the origin of law, revolution lives in suffrage.

There is no evidence that Henry George and José Martí knew one another, but there is good reason to believe that Martí knew Father Edward McGlynn. One of his longest chronicles describes the "The Schism of the Catholics in New York." Martí was no supporter of Catholicism; among his earliest writing is a note, written in 1871, "The Catholic priesthood is necessarily immoral."

His 1887 report for *La Nación* begins by emphasizing the significance of Father McGlynn's support for George, particularly a deposition at Cooper Union on January 17, 1887. To Martí, however, it wasn't just that the Archbishop opposed Henry George; it was even more that he was stepping outside his proper realm of religious governance and interfering in a political contest.

Nothing of what is happening in the United States today is comparable in transcendence and interest with the struggle between the authorities of the Catholic Church and the Catholic people of New York. This has reached such a point that for the first time the loyal observer wonders in amazement if Catholic doctrine can truly belong in a free nation without being harmful to it.... From the heated controversy in

New York the corrupt Church was left chastised unmercifully, and the Church of justice and compassion triumphant....

Who is the sinner, he who from the holy pulpit misuses his authority in the area of dogma to immorally favor those who sell the law in payment for the vote that puts them in a position to dictate it; or he who, knowing that on the side of the poor there is nothing but bitterness, comforts them from within the Church as a priest, and helps them outside of it as a citizen?

...But the New York Catholics rose in fury against the Archbishop and laid plans for huge meetings. They set the ineffable piety of the persecuted priest against the contemptible character of those vicars and bishops who are the pride of archbishops. With all the intensity of the Irish soul they succeeded in regaining their right to think freely about public issues.... Never, not even in George's autumn campaign, was there greater enthusiasm. The hall resounded with cheering when those prominent Catholics fervently justified the absolute freedom of their political opinions....

In this long article (which is well worth reading in its entirety) Martí capably portrays the drama of a critical episode in US political history. By chronicling this story, he was able both to spread the message of Henry George to a Spanish readership through Latin America, and to set a boundary line to the Catholic Church's interests in political affairs in the US and beyond.

The enormous impact of Henry George beyond the English-speaking world during the "Gilded Age" is often forgotten. Latin America spawned Georgists in mid 20th century, but the endorsement of José Martí adds especial luster to George's name. Martí, after all, is venerated not just in the land of his birth but throughout Latin America. He wrote columns for newspapers from Argentina to Mexico, and spent considerable time in nations abutting the Caribbean. Statues of Martí are common in the Americas. One, recently placed in the garden of the Organization of American States in Washington, was done by a Chinese artist, Yuan Xi Kun.

Notes

1. Esther Allen (Editor and Translator). *José Martí: Selected Writings*. New York: Penguin Books, 2002. p. 425.
2. Jorge Ibarra, "Martí and Socialism," in Abel and Torrents, *José Martí: Revolutionary Democrat*. London: Athlone Press (Duke University Press in the US), 1986, p. 108