

José Martí, Henry George, and Cuban Possibilities  
Bill Batt, August, 2014

An opportunity arose this past June to join an educational visit to Cuba under the sponsorship of *The Nation* magazine.<sup>1</sup> For eight days some 24 subscribers and staff of this weekly had entrée to political insiders, academics and journalists on terms that few if any others have been given. With complementary essays in other Georgist publications, I hope here to focus on links among Cubans past to Georgist thought. Their inspiration comes almost entirely through the relationship between Henry George and José Martí, the father of Cuban nationalism.

I had only a vague notion of José Martí before arriving in Havana. He was a late 19<sup>th</sup> century Cuban nationalist who was killed in the first skirmish of 1895 ending Spanish colonialism. He is best known in the US today by Pete Seeger's rendition of Guantanamera. Shortly after checking into the Parque Central Hotel, however, I walked out to see Martí's statue in a park right across the street. I soon also discovered the atrium of the hotel had a wall of photos along with his bust, and was reminded that we landed at José Martí International Airport. All the convertible peso notes that we exchanged our dollars for had Martí's etched head. The guitar duo serenading was asked to play Guantanamera for hotel guests *ad nauseam*. 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 hadn't known until later upon my return that Martí's monument graces parks in dozens of other cities worldwide. The corner of New York's Central Park and the Avenue of the Americas has a powerful larger-than-life casting of Martí, just when mortally wounded, on his horse.<sup>2</sup> It was a gift to the city by noted sculptor Anna Hyatt Huntington in 1959, but couldn't then be placed until 1965 due to the protests of expatriate Cubans.<sup>3</sup> There are numerous other busts, portraits, buildings, street names, and memorials especially where the Cuban-American populations have settled. Yet from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present he is celebrated by many different elements of Cuban society, all claiming him as their champion,<sup>4</sup> initially as the symbol of Cuba's national liberation from Spain, but later from American dominance and its corporate interests. Cuban anti-Castro expatriates in the US hold up Martí as their champion too. It's an ongoing struggle over what he is the symbol. Perhaps for this reason, when the Cuban filmmaker Fernando Perez dramatized his life in a recent 2010 work, *José Martí: el ojo del canario* (The Eye of the Canary), it focused on his

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Lee Harris, "A Magazine Leads a Trip to Cuba," *New York Times*, June 2, 2014. <http://Intransit.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/02>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.centralparknyc.org/things-to-see-and-do/attractions/José-julian-Martí.html>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.flickr.com/photos/wallyg/2524454642/>.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Richard Gray, *Jose Marti: Cuban Patriot*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1962; Jeffrey Belnap and Raul Fernandez (eds.), *Jose Marti's "Our America:" from National to Hemispheric Cultural Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998; Lillian Guerra, *The Myth of Jose Marti: Conflicting Nationalisms in Early Twentieth-Century Cuba*; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005; and Mauricio A. Font and Alfonso W. Quiroz (editors), *The Cuban Republic and Jose Marti: Reception and Use of a National Symbol*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006. Chapel Hill: University of Press, 2005.

youthful education and evaded any exploration of his thought and ideas.<sup>5</sup> Another, titled *José Martí and Cuba Libre*, is a documentary also made in 2010.<sup>6</sup>

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, bearing physical scars on his legs as a lifelong reminder of his prison time. After completing his education at 22 and traveling to France, he returned to Cuba in 1877. He 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. There were occasional short trips to Central America and Caribbean Islands, before returning to Cuba in 1895, soon to be killed in the Santiago at the battle of Dos Rios. Yet by the time of his death his news columns, commentaries on Cuba as well as America, and poetry totaled dozens of volumes.<sup>7</sup> Books about Martí and his times also number well over one hundred; and they keep coming.<sup>8</sup>

I want here to explore his political and philosophical legacy. Even though he cannot be regarded as a philosopher, he was well versed in all the ideas of his time. He studied law in Spain and worked for a short time as a lawyer in Cuba. He had a course in political economy, using a text of French Jesuit professor Joséph Garnier, who faithfully followed the liberal ideas of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Jean Baptiste Say.<sup>9</sup> He was also introduced to Proudhon. So he was exposed in depth to European history and philosophy. He read Marx, and he understood Marx. He also read George and understood George; today he would be called a Georgist. In his writing and speaking, one editor of his works notes, he is known to have mentioned Marx only twice – once at Marx's eulogy where he paid homage to George. In contrast, he "alludes to George dozens of times throughout his work, always

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.filmaffinity.com/es/film976155.html>, among several others.

<sup>6</sup> [Digital.films.com/play/AEFXUE](http://digital.films.com/play/AEFXUE), narration in English.

<sup>7</sup> When I was in school, I learned that the three most widely acclaimed books on American society were all written by foreigners. The first was Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, the second was James Bryce's *The American Commonwealth*, and the third was Harold Laski's *The American Presidency*. I have little doubt that if Martí's commentaries on American society were made accessible in English, his would be similarly listed. Compilations of his works variously number 27, 42, or 70 volumes, a stupendous effort for a man who lived only to age 42. One biography cites them as follows: *Obras Completas*, Havana: Editorial Tropicico, 1936-1947, 70 vols; and *Obras Completas*, Havana: Editorial Lex, 1946, 2 vols., 4225 pages. Worldcat indicates that three American university libraries have a compilation on CD.

<sup>8</sup> See Alfred Lopez, *Jose Marti: A Revolutionary Life*, Austin: University of Texas Press, forthcoming 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Mace, "The Economic Thinking of José Martí: Legacy Foundation for the Integration of America," January 24, 2013, at <http://www.akimoo.com/2013/the-economic-thinking-of-José-Martí-legacy-foundation-for-the-integration-of-america/>.

admiringly.”<sup>10</sup> Yet he has become Cuba’s national hero evoked by every faction and party for his writing about justice and his fervent nationalism.<sup>11</sup>

Upon coming to the United States in 1880, Martí was in awe of what he observed, even “dazzled” according to one account.<sup>12</sup> In due course, he became less enamored of the American society, particularly 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.<sup>13</sup>

In the course of his fifteen years in New York (with short trips elsewhere), 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.”<sup>14</sup> 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.

As strongly as he expressed his views about monopoly in industry and finance he saw just as clearly the evils of colonialism. And often too he wrote about matters of free

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<sup>10</sup> Esther Allen (Editor and Translator). *Jose Martí: Selected Writings*. New York: Penguin Books, 2002. P. 425.

<sup>11</sup> The most detailed and incisive analysis of Martí’s thought is the edited collection of papers presented in London in 1983 at the Institute of Latin American Studies. *José Martí: Revolutionary Democrat*. Christopher Abel and Nissa Torrents, Editors. London: Athlone Press (Duke University Press in the US), 1986. A second valuable work is *José Martí: Mentor of the Cuban Nation*, John M. Kirk. Gainesville: University of South Florida, 1983. Of course there are voluminous other resources in Spanish to which I have no access.

<sup>12</sup> The late Philip J. Foner, noted City College historian, edited three volumes of Martí’s work, the first of which, *Inside the Monster: Writings on the United States and American Imperialism*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975) quotes him as saying (pp.31-32), “At last I am in a country where everyone seems to be his own master. Here, one can be proud of the species. Everybody works. Everybody reads.” Further on he continued, “I feel obligated to this country, where the unprotected always find a friend. A kind hand is always outstretched to those looking for honest work. Here, a good idea always finds welcoming, soft, and fertile ground. One must be intelligent, that is all. Do something useful, and you will have everything you want. Doors are shut for those who are dull and lazy; life is secure for those who obey the law of work.”

<sup>13</sup> Foner, p. 33-34, quoted from an article published as “Knights of Labor Strike,” *La Nacion* (Buenos Aires), January 27, 1884.)

<sup>14</sup> quoted Abel and Torrents, *op.cit.*, p. 108.

trade and tariffs. In the temper of the time and because he was living in New York, his exposure to all these issues was immediate and acute. 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 last letter to his closest friend, Manuel Mercado, a day before his death (left unfinished), characterized Cuba's northern neighbor as "the monster."<sup>15</sup>

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,<sup>16</sup>

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; all of New Mexico and its rangelands, all of Mississippi and its rivers, all of Florida and its orange groves.

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, who do not buy this privilege with their declaration to obey the laws of the land they covet. Non but the foreigner who declares his intention of accepting citizenship in the Republic will be able to obtain land in it, unless that land is inherited or given in payment of a debt.

For all his prolific legacy, Martí did not think of himself as a writer, an advocate, or a poet; rather he saw himself first as an activist. In fact the most penetrating analysis of his work today concerns the relationship between thought and action. Writing was a means to action, if not the only means. 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

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<sup>15</sup> "I have lived in the monster and I know its entrails; my sling is David's." Letter to Manuel Mercado, May 18, 1895, Dos Rios Camp. in *José Martí Reader: Writings on the Americas*. Deborah Shnookal and Mirta Muniz, Editors. New York & Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1999. P. 243. See also Foner, p. x., and <http://www.historyofcuba.com/history/Martí/mercado.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Foner, p. 264-265, quoted from an article titled, "Political Corruption" *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), August 15, 1886.)

workers in Tampa and the Key West.<sup>17</sup> 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.

As much as Martí wrote about his homeland, he offered astute observations about the United States too. His most notable essay, *Nuestra America*, (Our America) was after the luster of what he first observed had worn off. According to historian Jorge Ibarra, Martí

set out the basis of an alliance between the enlightened middle classes, the peasantry, and the working class against the landowning oligopoly and US imperialist penetration. In this period, Martí became convinced that the US Congress and the US executive represented the interests of large landowners, railway magnates, mining bosses and industrial tycoons rather than those of the people.”<sup>18</sup>

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. He wrote a probing critique of Herbert Spencer’s “The Future of Slavery” in 1884. Moreover, he concluded that poor laws and other welfare programs treated merely symptoms and didn’t get to the roots of the problem.<sup>19</sup> Ibarra notes that, “Cuban exile historians have [often] attributed to Martí the views of Spencer which he merely describes. This crude falsification of Martí’s thought is used by dissident Cubans [by which he means expatriots mostly in the US] to justify their opposition to socialism.”<sup>20</sup> Martí turned then to Henry George who was equally critical of the exploitation that capitalism wrought. Ibarra claims that after 1884 Martí had become “broadly sympathetic to the ideas espoused by George.” He would write for the Buenos Aires periodical, *La Nacion*, 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 . . . These apostles believe that since lands must eventually belong to those that live upon them, the less often they are sold the fewer problems there will be in recovering them from those that acquired them through corruption and trickery.<sup>21</sup>

The English language resources differ as to when this was written; Martí’s *Obras Completas* is unavailable to me. Ibarra says he would soon become even firmer in his conviction that,

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<sup>17</sup> Gerald E. Poyo, “José Martí: Architect of social unity in the émigré communities of the United States,” in Abel and Torrents., *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Jorge Ibarra, “Martí and Socialism,” in Abel and Torrents, *ibid.*, pp. 83-107.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93. from *Escenas Norteamericanas*, (North American Vignettes), written for the Buenos Aires newspaper, *La Nacion*, July 2, 1886.; published on August 15, 1886. A slightly different translation is available in Foner, p. 267.

'Poverty is unjust,' Henry George would say in a speech flavoured with shrewd irony, sad memories, full of images of abandoned families, of heartfelt and profound words in which is revealed his burning sympathy with human pain. 'We do not want to take wealth from anybody but to create more wealth than there is. Every human being, the unhappiest black, the wretched child born to misery in a slum, has a right to a plot of land sufficient to feed him. This is his birthright.'<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately, the citation for this passage's English translation is inaccessible to me. 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.<sup>23</sup>

His regard for George could hardly be higher. This 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. Elsewhere he would write,

Henry George came from California and reissued his book, *Progress and Poverty*, and it spread through Christendom like a bible. In it is that same love expressed by the Nazarene's love set down in the practical language of our days. The main thesis of the work, destined to have bearing on the causes of a poverty that grows in spite of human progress, is that the land must belong to the nation. From this essential premise, the book derives all the needed reforms. Let the man who works and improves the land possess it. Let him pay the state for it while he uses it. Let nobody have rights to land unless he pays the state for its use, and let him pay no more than its rental. Thus the weight of taxes to the nation will fall only upon those who receive from it a way of paying them, life without unjust taxes will be easy and inexpensive, and the poor will have homes, time for cultivating their minds, understanding their public obligations, and loving their children.

George's book was a revelation not merely to the working man, but to thinkers. 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. He is a man born to be the father of men. When he sees an unhappy man, he feels a slap on his own cheek! The labor unions cluster around him; to succeed, he tells them, you must educate

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<sup>22</sup> This is a quote from Ibarra with the citation *Obras Completas* XI, p. 209.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.96. quoted from José Martí *Obras Completas* (Havana), Vol XI, p. 209.

yourselves! In a nation where suffrage is the origin of law, revolution lives in suffrage.<sup>24</sup>

Because he lived in New York contemporaneously with Henry George, they might even have known one another, but there is no evidence of it. But there is good reason to believe that he knew Father Edward McGlynn. One of his longest chronicles describes the “The Schism of the Catholics in New York.”

McGlynn:

The strength of the hymn lies in the thrust, the tenderness, the contagious and sympathetic faith with which the workers of New York united for the first time in serious political endeavor, try to elect as mayor for this laboring city, Henry George, one of the cleanest and most daring thinkers that cast their eyes on the confused entrails of the new universe.

He, of the Socratic head, seems to radiate light on this apostolic campaign. Priests help him and priest-like reformers assist him with their words and their influence over many Latin Americans.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Foner, pp. 279-281; from “The Schism of the Catholics in New York,” from *El Partido Liberal* (Mexico), and *La Nacion* (Buenos Aires), April 14, 1887, dated in New York on January 16, 1887, from José Martí *Obras Completas* (Havana), Vol XI, p 146.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94. He was of course referring here to his support from Father Edward McGlynn.