

José Martí's Vision for Education in the Cuban Republic

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Education of all citizens was regarded by Martí not only as an inviolable right of every Cuban, regardless of color or social standing, but also—and far more important—it constituted an absolute necessity for the successful founding of the Republic. Martí's many years in the United States afforded him valuable insight into the type of education that he advocated for the Republic. It revealed to him other ways in which a modern, more practical form of teaching could be established. Martí's vision of Cuban education for the Republic is important in understanding contemporary Cuba, as his verses are painted on school buildings, read and recited by pioneros in classrooms, and proclaimed whenever the topic of education is addressed publicly. How does Martí's vision of Cuban education compare with the ways Cuban young people today understand and have internalized the meaning of his frequently-quoted statement about education, "Ser culto es el único modo para ser libre" ("Maestros Ambulantes," 1884)

This conference presentation and proposed article will probe José Martí's vision of Cuban education for the Republic, using primarily his twenty-five volumes of *Obras Completas* and comparing it with data I collected from 2017-2019 from Cuban young people, probing their understanding of the words, "culto" and "libre," noting to what degree and in what sense each Cuban considers him/herself both "culto" and "libre." Interestingly, the 40 interviews generated much conversation about these terms and their connection to Cuban education, to the interviewee personally, and to the Cuban context.

The topic of education was of great concern to Martí, as education represented for him a guarantee of the successful implementation of other social programs on the island. This concern of Martí helps to explain why there are references to a variety of topics dealing with education, among which the most commonly found are the need for a practical agricultural education (Martí, VII, p.164; VIII, pp. 276 - 278; VIII, p.380; XIV,p.229); for the development of a carefully-planned mechanical education (Martí, VIII, pp. 278 - 279 ; X, p. 375; XI, p. 80 and p.85); the need for instituting night schools for workers (Martí, XII, p.459); the need to avoid looking abroad automatically for solutions to Cuban problems (Martí, VII, p. 325); and the need for special care involved in educating children (Martí, XVIII, p.302; XVIII, p.382) ; and the need for establishing kindergartens, free to the public, and situated particularly in poorer districts (XII, p.414); and finally, the fundamental need, given the lack of facilities outside the city, to provide a well-balanced education to the rural dwellers, the guajiros, by means of a system of travelling teachers, the "maestros ambulantes" (Martí, VIII, p. 16 ; XVIII, p. 284; VIII, pp. 289-291). In short, as he wrote in *La America* in August of 1883, the modern era demanded a new, and essentially practical, form of education:

El mundo nuevo require la escuela. nueva. Es necesario sustituir al espíritu literario de la educación, el espíritu científico . . . Quien abona bien su tierra, trabaja menos , tiene tierra para mas tiempo, y gana más (Martí, VIII, p. 299).

Of particular note is Martí's desire to provide an education to people who otherwise would be unable to receive any formal training, either because they did not have sufficient funds to study, or because they lived in isolated parts of the Island.

He saw that both in Cuba and in the United States the poor uneducated workers were easily exploited, and his goal of implementing a socially-oriented education was a way to ensure education for the workers. Martí therefore concluded: "*hasta que los obreros no sean hombres cultos, no serán felices*" (Martí, VIII, p. 352; emphasis mine). To this end, that of converting the workers into "hombres cultos," he drew up plans for a large-scale development of the United States' idea of free night-schools for mainly workers who would otherwise not have the opportunity to go to school. Since Martí himself had taught for several years in an institution organized by "La Liga," a society of Black Cuban workers living in the United States, he had a first-hand knowledge of the benefits of these night schools:

las escuelas de noche, donde el educando que salió de las de día para ganarse el pan, o él que no ha tenido tiempo ni lugar de educarse de día, va, después del trabajo a aprender lo más fino y complicado del entendimiento a las primeras letras (Martí, XII, p.459)

In order to solidify the gains made by the Revolution, Martí saw it necessary to provide the future generation with the immediate benefits of the liberation struggle, so that they would be better able to continue the revolutionary process. This emphasis that Martí placed upon the education of the young can be judged by his opinion that, before providing even food to his compatriots, he prioritized guaranteeing the young members of the Republic the right to an education:

"Pan no se puede dar a todos los que lo han menester, pero los pueblos que quieren salvarse han de preparar a sus hijos contra el crimen: en cada calle, un kindergarten" (Martí, XII, p.414).

Martí advocated a system of drafting teachers into an instructional corps and obliging them to work in the newly-formed schools: *se han de reclutar soldados para el ejército y maestros para los pobres: debe ser obligatorio el servicio de maestros, como el de soldados: él que no haya enseñado un año, que no tenga el derecho de votar: preparar un pueblo para defenderse, y para vivir con honor, es el mejor modo de defenderlo* (Martí, XII, pp. 414-415).

Moreover, for Martí, it was a moral obligation to ensure that all Cubans have the right to a basic education, even in the-most remote areas of the island. He was deeply aware of the many dangers inherent in the existence of an ignorant mass of people, and at one point even intended to write a study on "*La educación de campo, para evitar que se cree el caudillaje*" (Martí, XVIII, p. 289). In two articles published in *La America* in 1884 he argued the need for the establishment of "un cuerpo de maestros viajeros" (Martí, VIII, p.16), who would teach a mixture of agricultural sciences and basic philosophy to the country-dwellers: "*He ahí, pues, lo que han de llevar los maestros por los campos. No solo explicaciones agrícolas e instrumentos mecánicos, sino la ternura que hace tanta falta y tanto bien a los hombres*" (Martí, VIII, p.289). Martí's plans of opening scores of schools, "para regarlos luego por valles , montones y rincones" (Martí, VIII, p. 291) was thus intended to place a fundamental education for the first 3 time in Cuban history within the grasp of all the citizens of the Republic, who would thus have the opportunity to

become "hombres cultos." In fact, in a speech in 1891 to the Cuban tobacco workers, he stated: "*Yo quiero que la ley primera de nuestra republica sea el culto de los cubanos a la dignidad plena del hombre*" (Martí, IV, p. 270, emphasis mine).

In his famous letter to the editor of the New York Herald, in 1895, Jose Marti further revealed his high regard for this concept of dignidad, while explaining that one of the fundamental intentions of the liberation campaign was to establish—and to protect by law—the doctrine of human dignity. In the letter Marti related the moral depression of Cuba:

El hijo de Cuba ... padece, en indecible amargura, de ver encadenado en suelo feraz, y en el su sofocante dignidad de hombre, a la obligación de pagar, con sus manos libres de americano, el tributo casi integro de su producción, y el diario y más doloroso de su honra, a las necesidades y vicios de la monarquía (Martí, IV, p. 152).

Marti's aspirations for a moral regeneration of Cuba were undoubtedly related to his hopes of re-awakening the patriotic zeal of his compatriots, as this would naturally facilitate his far reaching plans for the revolutionary struggle. Marti's plans were essentially to convert his fellow citizens into "entes conscientes, cultos, responsables, capaces de llevar sobre si la carga de una gigantesca tarea" (Le Riverend, 1970, p. 62). Noticeably, throughout Martí's thoughts on education, the word "culto" is repeated as an end goal. In 1884, in *Maestros Ambulantes*, he states "ser culto es el único modo para ser libre." A powerful declaration, this phrase is one that becomes highlighted, emphasized, repeated, and recited in the 1959 Revolution and to this day.

Reviewing the context for this statement, along with Martí's multiple references to "culto" and "libre," I propose to unpack the meaning in both Martí's nineteenth century sociopolitical thought on education and the ways his message has been (re-) interpreted in the twenty-first century. What is Cuban education and for what purpose does/did it serve both now and then? The young Cubans I interviewed provided a variety of understandings of these words and pondered whether they were truly "culto" and "libre" living on the island that Martí is credited for liberating from domination, but where democracy is still yet to be achieved .

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