Goizueta Foundation Undergraduate Fellowship

Re-reading Jose Marti in Today’s World
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This research was conducted to examine Jose Martí’s major literary works and the interpretations of his sociopolitical thought over time through to the present day. As a child living in Havana, Cuba, I used to read the famous stories Jose Marti had published in La Edad de Oro. It was easy to appreciate the significance of education, the pursuit of consciousness, and the respect for honesty that Marti took upon himself to inspire in children with these stories. I’ve always wanted to read his other major works and understand the moral world and ethic conduct that have transcended the figure of Jose Marti as the keystone of Cuban national identity. I am grateful for the opportunity to have participated in the Goizueta Foundation Undergraduate Fellowship and completely satisfied with the collection of published works available at the Cuban Heritage Collection. His literary contributions are vast in numbers and emblematic of the social justice, dignity and well being that he desperately wanted “with all and for the good of all.” It is easy to find in his works a legacy of freedom, democracy, fairness, philanthropy, education, duty, dignity, love, hospitality, friendship and many other prominent themes that elevate the human spirit. Marti’s literature encourages readers to cherish the very virtues that lead the pursuit of a better life.

Jose Marti dedicated his lifework to the unification of the Cuban people to fight for independence from Spain and to construct a sincere, democratic republic. He demonstrated a desperate fervor for independence as a child when he started publishing political writings in newspapers such as “10 de Octubre.” As he was sent to prison at age sixteen and forced to face and suffer the gruesome details of slavery, his resentment toward Spanish rule developed further.
He was sent to Spain where he later graduated from a career in law and realized Spain’s oppressive and colonial attitude toward Cuba. Marti then traveled through Mexico, Guatemala, and Venezuela and lived for some time in the United States. It was living in the United States when Marti was set to devote himself to work for the independence of Cuba, raising support, collecting funds, and giving speeches to unite Cuban exiles under the revolutionary movement.

With an unbreakable spirit of sacrifice, Marti wrote to prepare the conditions for a successful revolution and for the transparent foundations of a lasting republic. He had not supported the efforts by Maximo Gomez and Antonio Maceo to invade Cuba in 1884 because he knew a victorious and lasting revolution would need careful planning. He went to great extent to prepare and justify the revolutionary war because as he saw it, the suffering had lingered too long and there was unfortunately no pacific way to attain national dignity. Jose Marti had thought of a “revolution against all other revolutions, the uprising of all pacific men to become soldiers so that neither they nor any other would be soldiers again.” He saw no other option than brute force for no sight of conciliatory efforts was foreseen by Spain’s end. Hence, a popular revolution for a radical structural change of colonial Cuba was imperative. The war would be free of all unnecessary act of violence and any demonstration of hate toward the Spanish, only the inflexible will against the enemy that attempts to prevent the Independence.

Marti had condemned anything he thought would endanger the ideal republic. He had written extensively to criticize any authoritarian figure above him, while also not tolerating the thought of someone inferior to him. He confronted Maceo and Gomez and warned them against the personal despotism and ambitious private goals that could eliminate the revolutionary spirit of selfless willingness to fight for and deliver the best interests of the people. He had written about the human dignity, the respect for equal rights, the moral responsibility to do well and help
others, the humility, and the sincerity he wanted to inspire in all men and women to embrace. In his literature Marti pictured the ethical behavior and the level of consciousness he wanted people to grow and use to construct the righteous government framework that was to bring prosperity and wellbeing to the island. He strove to instill these virtues in the good people that were to construct the republic because only a republic built in these virtues would be a good, lasting and inclusive democratic republic. When Jose Marti died however, the moral support and ideal organization of the revolution died with him. The republic had fallen to military rule under the United States by 1898 and the ideal government Marti had envisioned fell to hands of corruption and politicians of short-term goals.

Immediately after his death, Marti’s figure was immediately exalted and revered as the founding father of the independent Cuba. Many of the different governmental administrations since the war of independence used Marti as their source of inspiration. The importance of his nation-building role was always recognized. During the years of the republic, Marti was more of a mythical saint-like figure. He was idealized by the intellectual Salvador Aguero who described him as a saint in 1936 and he was also respected by other figures such as Miguel Landaluce and Federico de Cordova in 1940s. Jose Manuel Cortina, a Cuban politician who served under Fulgencio Batista, described Marti as a “mystic and a saint.” Other Latin American intellectuals like Ruben Dario admired his exceptional moral qualities and advocated for all Cubans to imitate him.

After the revolution of 1959 and the migration waves into the exile that followed, Marti’s biographies started to focus on his ideas rather than on his life. The inspiration of Jose Marti’s works was transformed to the source of an unfortunate polarization between different political leanings. Marti has since then been used as a poster of propaganda for different political
agendas. Marti is seen as a champion of democracy to many and his thoughts are used as a vehicle to express frustration toward the government in Cuba. On the other hand, he is also portrayed as an anti-imperialist and radical figure by the Cuban government, which uses Marti’s legacy to support the socialist revolution.

Furthermore, there was more in Marti beyond independence from colonial rule; his true end was the respect for the equal rights and dignity of all. His end was to change the national character of his people and inspire them to answer the call of duty, to feel a responsibility for fellow humans and live for the “superior dictate of life,” that is, in Marti’s moral world, the well-being of all. His end was the humanitarian ideal: he wanted people to live with dignity and honesty. Most of his calling was based on human, moral imperatives and not on conditioned and partial political ideologies. The base of his inspiration was basic love and friendship. His was an endless pursuit of truth. His was a calling, an international, objective, basic, humanitarian and pure calling for honest men to unite for the dignity and social justice of all. His was a calling for the “mobilization of free men” to find universal friendship and solidarity amongst each other: to be educated of all our deficiencies and mistakes in order to be better capable of fomenting the “natural virtue and honesty of men.”

Jose Marti was a philanthropist who understood love to be the only element capable of bonding people to aspire solidarity, sacrifice, and responsibility in each one of us. This is the quest he wanted to inspire in all: the quest for knowing, the quest for duty, the quest for dignity, and the quest for love. His was a rebellious spirit since he was born and more so since the first time he suffered the injustices he saw in Cuba. He thought people are born with “prepared bandages in your hands: the religions, the philosophies, the political systems.” He was naturally
rebellious against these bandages; he stood for the free, independent spirit of the individual. Jose Marti is an embodiment of the moral, pure, heroic, humanitarian, and honest human being.

Marti would be a fierce activist in today’s increasingly modern and dehumanizing society. He would not be comfortable with the personal despotism currently placed in Cuba. Marti would strongly condemn the cynicism and the oppression of self-realization that is commonplace in Cuba today. He would also criticize the lack of moral values and virtues he championed in his writings. The commoditization of mankind and natural resources as well as the competitive and bellicose mindset in an increasingly corporate and globalized world have superseded the nurturing of the humility, fairness, moral responsibility and other basic values he wanted to inspire in people. Thus, Marti would be living in desperation when realizing the difficulties of constructing the completely sincere, democratic republic he had envisioned and the moral world he had created in his literature.