

# José Martí's Anthropological View of Blacks

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Essential controversy about Martí's opus does not diminish when one considers its connection to his era's anthropological views. Yet, to start one's deliberation by focusing precisely on the most problematic paragraph he ever wrote, serves to ensure objectivity concerning a matter that many tend to approach preconceived notions. The exponent's political leanings have a propensity to shape the nature of the meditation, as well as other matters concerning José Martí.

Using these never published ideas that some avoid, and others excessively criticize as a point of departure, may prove the inescapable need to see Martí within the context of his world's logic, with its incoherency, progress, and spiraling notions, without which, it is impossible to ever understand him:

"I awoke today, the twentieth of August, formulating in words, as a summary of ideas that matured while I slept, the social elements that the black race will contribute after the liberation of the Island of Cuba—not just

appearances but rather a living force. This is considering the race not as a single unit, because it is not, but rather seeing, with the will to do so, the truth that within this collectivity, or some part of it, there is material enough with which to create a remedy for the primitive characteristics that they, the direct or closely related successors of savage African blacks, who have not yet undergone the series of changes necessary for them to no longer reveal in the exercise of the civil rights the native brutality of their brief historical existence, with great danger from a country above that is refined and civilized, will inherently develop."<sup>1</sup>

If anyone concludes after highlighting the antiracist progressivism of the above cited excerpt of Martí's work, that in writing this the Cuban dynamited his own project<sup>2</sup> to someone else will assure—basing him or herself on the same paragraph—that the independence leader "not only rearticulates the basic precepts (primitivism, brutality, sav-

agery) of the evolutionary eugenics of his time (Gobineau, Chamberlain, Lapouge...), but also assumes the old Criollo argument of the 'black peril.'"<sup>3</sup> This sort of criticism, among others, is aimed at philosophical ideas situated in the context of 1880-1881. Martí would need quite a few more years to reach the 1930s.

A word of caution to those who want to see this poet in his true element: he does not follow Gobineau and company. He is familiar with the philosophy of intellectuals—Lewis H. Morgan, Edgar B. Taylor, Charles Darwin, and Mac Lennan—who, although not currently discussed, did influence the history of anthropology. Their ideas garnered numerous followers and, despite the fact Martí might not have read them all, their concepts most definitely reached him. Although Martí was not an anthropological expert—as French researcher Jean Lamore so rightly asserts—one must acknowledge that he touches upon this area, a consequence of numerous readings he knows to have shaped the best minds in Cuban society.

Martí not only mentions, counters or cites writers, travelers, scientists, tourists, adventurers and anthropologists, in a variety of texts, he also ultimately refers to the fact that it is “the accumulation of melanine in the subepidermal layer that colors the Ethiopian’s skin black,”<sup>4</sup> to the influence of climate and nutrition, as well as to the fact that precautionary factors for defense against certain diseases played a role in the development of different human types.<sup>5</sup> He even employs terms such as Brachyceph and Dolicoceph.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, following Thomas Huxley, he mentions the “Ulotrichi, with non-smooth hair, and the Leiotrichi, with smooth hair.”

Elsewhere, in an effort to discredit osteology, he writes: “the weight of a brain has no correlation whatsoever with ethnic differ-

ences.”<sup>7</sup> In mid-1888, he further explains that not only this is true, but that neither the mentality nor morality of mankind depends on a particular shape or deformity of the brain or bones.<sup>8</sup>

### *Terminology in his time*

Experts and commentators agree that in Martí’s time almost everyone believed in the existence of inferior and superior races. The scientific community practiced racial classification. When he makes reference to a “brief historical existence,” as is cited earlier, he rejects biology as a generator of categories or inequalities between peoples. When he cites “heritage” he is referring to cultural and not biological inheritance. Later, he more readily identifies character with culture, as Fernando Ortiz did.<sup>9</sup>

Doubtlessly, we are faced with a fundamental break with Count Gobineau. One should remember on the other hand, that “savage” was not just a derogatory adjective, but rather a definition endorsed by scientists like Morgan in *Ancient Society* (1877) and Taylor for an instant in social evolution.

The importance of Morgan for Marxism has been sufficiently explained. The first cycle of social development in Marxist doctrine is called ‘primitive communism,’ characterized by the precarious development of productive forces. The Real Academia de la Lengua Española [The Royal Spanish Academy] explains the current perseverance of this word with precisely the meaning that Martí employed: “*savage*—said of aboriginal peoples or little developed civilizations, as well as of the individuals who comprise same civilization, or manifestations of such;” “heritage” is of course, a manifestation of that society, of that culture, of that “nature.”



*José Martí (1853-1895)*

Without intending to erase the intense polemic charge of the cited paragraph, I am reminded that Martí does not position primitive characters “versus the refined culture of the Criollo population,” as has been written. The counterpoint is established vis-à-vis “high culture,” i.e., hegemony, a placement he will later clarify. Inasmuch, one can equally infer that there is an intellectual gamut amongst blacks, from whose multiplicitous or questionable social engineering he then attempts to find the “remedy” he seeks.

Upon asserting that race is not a unit, Martí is not trying to obscure a community of people or, with that, its racial identities; an old colonial trapping. For him a race is not a “unit” for its ethnic origins, or on account those mestizos who with some frequency

socially climb, or those who put faith in their ancestral culture or become Christians, or noteworthy professionals, etc. To elude the fact that a number of Martí’s black friends, his closest, are intellectuals would be an error. Having done so, one would quickly ascertain the truth of this in the emerging bourgeoisie of the United States.

### *A Time for “Modifications”*

What is the young Martí’s gravest error in this paragraph? Many years later anthropology would outline the time needed for individuals and peoples to achieve the acquisition of a new cultural repertoire. By confirming that the dilemma that preoccupies Martí does

not rest in the biological inequality of men, the issue then would be “how much time would be needed for the realization of these modifications,” assuming the “potential for humans to change,”<sup>10</sup> something Martí apparently identifies with as a “series of critically necessary transformations.” This is about the necessary amount of time to invest in someone who comes from a simpler society and is attempting to assume the cultural repertoire of the more complex one.

Before clarifying the question, it would be useful to examine Martí’s attraction to lineal evolution. Lamore alleges that this theory seduces Martí because in it he saw “an affirmation of the perfectibility of men and of peoples.”<sup>11</sup>

This scholar reminds us that when he makes the extremely problematic reference to American Indians having been arrested in their ‘infancy,’ his intention was to counter the argument that presented Native Americans as degenerate beings. One goes from infancy to adulthood—adds Lamore. Infancy represents the promise of development, which is concomitant with his stoic perspective of the universe’s harmony and the unity of mankind. For Martí the creator, “the key to the sociological error” stemmed from “assuming the inferiority of a race because one sees it as (because it is) at an inferior stage of its development.”<sup>12</sup>

In addition to facing this dilemma of how many generations are needed to acquire a new cultural repertoire, i.e. the predominant, Hispano-Western one, the future author of *Nuestra América* [Our América] cannot find a valid explanation for the unidirectional solution that is proposed in his time. This is more easily understood if we recall that said acquisition is considered absolutely essential—for blacks en masse—if the desired objective is for them to enjoy “the exercise of civil rights.”

The bard is thinking “beyond the moment of liberation,” in a democratic community that he simultaneously imagines and contests in such a way that he often feels it within his reach. In such a society, blacks would fully exercise their “civil rights”: Martí reiterates this notion incessantly, often substituting “human rights” for “civil rights.”

Upon gazing beyond the above cited paragraph and nearer to the current time, one finds that certain propositions have emerged that label what we call their self-improvement. Significantly, barely three years after having written said paragraph, Martí writes in *La Edad de Oro* that each “savage man” who is born “without knowing that around the world there are peoples, begins life the same way men lived thousands of years ago.”<sup>13</sup>

The scientific term “savage” applies to all races. Thanks to the importance that he gives cultural diffusion, Martí describes the architecture and history of domicile construction in the United States, Spain, Switzerland, and the Orinico region. In a sort of comparative architecture, he reveals the parallelism between those fabricated in Africa and those built by the “Germans of yore.”<sup>14</sup> The terms ‘savage,’ “primitive” or “brutal” do not only distinguish the African black, they constitute notions or synonyms employed by a hardly impartial science, and with them, Martí labels people from any latitude and race.

However, of course, the use of these connotations was not overlooked or entirely free of criticism in Martí’s writing. At times, he will ridicule them and will even condemn much of anthropology for the rampantly deterministic thread of “superficial science” that runs through it, whose goal it is “to justify inequality, which in a government of men means to rationalize tyranny.”<sup>15</sup> Martí lives at a time in which a relentless, segregationist-style osteology is at its very peak. In a truly

notable explanation, he wrote about a meeting in Berlin among a group of Western countries that included Turkey held to divide up Africa. Thus, ‘civilization,’ another term bequeathed to us in modern times, is “The pretext that some individuals who know Latin have a natural right to steal land from Africans who speak Arabic; the pretext that civilization, which is the popular name for the current state of mankind in Europe, has the natural right to take possession of foreign land belonging to uncivilized men, which is the name that those who desire the land apply to anyone who is not from Europe or European America; as if head for head, and heart for heart, an exploiter of Irishmen or recruiter of Cipayo soldiers were worth more than one of those prudent, amorous and disinterested Arabs who rather than learning from defeat or being daunted by numbers, defend their homeland...”<sup>16</sup>

### *A labyrinth*

But, beyond any confusion, why in the paragraph about the black Cuban does the poet leave himself in a labyrinth with no way out? As I have said, later on anthropology will calculate a shorter period for individuals and peoples to be able to acquire new cultural repertoires. The “necessary changes” occur over less time than perhaps Martí considered at the beginning of the eighties. Would he eventually figure out if it would be “the direct or near successors” who would manage to incorporate the Western cultural model in order to exercise their civil rights, with which he was proposing at least an interesting anthropological questioning of the national context?

What is it the bard is talking about and above all, where is he going? In the first place, towards widespread literacy, which would allow people to interpret laws and either

accept or reject them, as well as to compete on more equal footing. Moreover, Martí wanted blacks to be included in a world in which in order to efficiently resist it was absolutely necessary to know the hegemonic culture. There was no other way to achieve freedom, if one believes that this is what Martí wanted for all Cubans. There was a reason that he was the spirit behind the creation of the Sociedad de Instrucción y La Liga—and other similar organizations—with a majority of exiled Cuban blacks in New York.

It may be of interest to ascertain, on the other hand, how Martí questions his own linear evolutionism more than he actually destroys his own project, how he couches his assumption about civilizing differences, those historical “necessary changes.” In 1893, in a transcendent proclamation, he asserts: “Ignorant and simple African fathers have engendered a great number of Cubans in Cuba who are at least as suited to create and develop a nascent people as those with a more felicitous skin color...”<sup>17</sup> Just lines later he proposes that “the freed man, within his condition of inequality, has shown himself to be as capable and good as his former master.”

One can see progress in this; the change is within the offspring of the man who arrived in the more complex society. Neither those who were born in Africa and went to Cuba are savages, as expressed in the scientific definition of the moment, nor do their “direct or close successors” now display either “natural brutality” or “primitive characteristics.” That direct descendency is able to assimilate its “other” world, a condition necessary for it to be able to take advantage of and transform it. Suggestively, those natives of the black continent are now just “ignorant and simple.” Ignorance here is identified with a lack of some specific instruction vital for advancement in the new space to which blacks have

been brought. The adjective “simple” denotes a striking resemblance to formulations found in later anthropological formulations.

Martí lives in the United States at a time when conservative discourse still blames indigenous people for their incompetence in assimilating to their new circumstances, an accusation that of course not only ignores the material usurpation, but also the cultural and psychological perturbation to which they were subjected by a “civilization” the poet calls “devastating,”<sup>18</sup> situating it both in the north of the continent as well as in Latin America. It is in the latter that the effects of this would abound in the new racial and cultural amalgam that was taking shape.

According to Martí, this attack is aimed at confirming the ineptitude of the native inhabitants for conducting themselves as Westerners and reaching the degree of advancement of a country doomed to imperialism. Martí the journalist makes reference to a United States functionary who speaks of an educational program in which education for Indians was entirely equal to education for whites of the same age; Martí also adds that Indians are as capable as whites to develop good work habits,<sup>19</sup> another accusation that was leveled against the native inhabitants of the United States.

### *Martí and Darwin*

The islander’s interest in Darwin’s work is more than established. If not by reading the *Origin of the Species*, which he might not have understood to its fullest, it was through another book by the Englishman that he really got his fill. Notably, he took special interest in the fact that in the struggle for natural selection there is also cooperation, by which means he proves that it is not all about clashing, violence and the survival of the fittest.<sup>20</sup>

Challenges to Social Darwinism—a concept foreign to but nevertheless based minimally on Darwin’s thinking—abound in Martí’s opus. Similarly, he challenges State Socialism.<sup>21</sup>

Martí will begin to instill in his work the fruits of his own ideological development.

This will ultimately bring him to disqualify the concept of race, perhaps his greatest intellectual achievement. In 1891, when he pens the now famous phrase “There is no racial hatred, because there are no races,” expresses not only a synthesis of his readings in physical anthropology, but also a rejection of the infinite contradictions he classifies purposefully as “bookstore races.”

Professor Marco Marín Llanes has reflected that perhaps the Apostol wanted to indicate that skin color was always used as a pretext for obscuring the interest of some men in dominating others. He also points out that Martí could never have imagined that by the end of the century that he did not live to see, science would reveal the mysteries of DNA and disqualify biological notions of race.

It was very likely Darwin’s study, *The Origin of Man*, which most vigorously led Martí to this conclusion, predated by six years—according to Taguieff—Emile Durkheim (*Le suicide: Étude de sociologie*),<sup>22</sup> which in 1897 questioned the concept of race from a scientific perspective. Regardless of the accuracy or lack thereof of this affirmation, there is no question that the Cuban was a precursor in this line of thinking.

While I lack the space here to delve into Darwin’s suggestions regarding the biological equality of the races, I would like to note that Martí conceptualizes *The Origin of Man*, unlike *The Origin of the Species*, which “cuts into the heart of man” because of the Darwinian thesis, as a manifestation of the “gentle hand of a serene Darwin.”<sup>23</sup> We could also say that from the Cuban Antonio J.

Martínez Puentes to Patrick Tort, many scholars see a Darwin who is convinced of the unity of the human race, which, according to the Englishman, all descended from one branch. For the scientist, who Martí will certainly criticize for his prejudices, the human races are similar in their development because of changes that are the direct result of exposure to different conditions, or by some sort of selection.

### *Other directions*

Yet, Martí discusses the detrimental effect that slavery had on the concept of race much more often than he mentions historical “change.” For this he uses the example of slavery in the United States to fuel his argument: “The character and intelligence of free men is evident in the sons of fathers who were victims of slavery.”<sup>24</sup>

The independence ideologist also follows other lines of thought. He posits that circumstances obscured the fact that the aptitude of blacks was constrained during slavery and continued to be under the emaciated freedom of colonial subordination. When he says that character and intelligence “are evident” [in the sons of former slaves], basing himself primarily on the black Cuban community in New York, he wants to assert that: “our poor have grown and shown acumen and authority in the defense of life in foreign and civilized lands: all the wealth they bore inside has emerged and can be observed in the [cigar factory] tribune, in the newspaper . . .”<sup>25</sup>

If in *El terremoto de Charleston* [The Charleston Earthquake] Martí declares, “The pretext for superiority is simply a matter of degree and time,”<sup>26</sup> i.e., in history, and this is the cause of the difference in the condition of peoples. In *Nuestra América* [Our America] blacks are competent and perfectly capable of

benefiting from, transforming, modernizing and civilizing their situation. Martí exhorts that “room be made” for them.<sup>27</sup>

The concept of racial equality is ubiquitous in Martí’s work. Toward the end of the decisive year 1887, in one of his chronicles documenting the New York sessions of a society for the advancement of science, Martí did not permit a talk by Scottish theologian and naturalist Henry Drummond (author of a number of commercially successful books, among them *Tropical Africa*), or his ideas, to go unchallenged.

Martí writes: “for this man, going to Africa is like seeing the dawn of the human animal.” Forthwith he attacks him using what could be a contemporary phrase: “He [Drummond] calls a distortion of intelligence what, judging by what he, himself, describes, is actually just a manifestation of local diversity.”<sup>28</sup> Here, Drummond, this man of many talents, invites even more criticism by Martí: “to deny the spiritual . . . is to deny that the virtues and evil in men are equal whether in the arid desert or the Scottish academe.”

In his article *La verdad sobre los Estados Unidos* [The Truth about the United States], a somewhat exaggerated article in the view of some, he reiterates his disqualification for this line of thinking, which is in debate just like the exiling of the word “race” from our vocabulary, something Tagueiff criticizes as “linguistic and semantic purification.”<sup>29</sup> Although Martí claims there are no races, Martí does not discard the term but rather uses it for its usefulness as an essential tool with which to condemn discrimination:

“There are no races: what there is are diverse varieties of mankind as regard details of their habits and ways resulting from their historical and climactic conditions, which does not change what is essential or identical in them.”<sup>30</sup>

The brevity required here does not allow me to expound on other topics, such as Martí's defense of a universal human aesthetic as a challenge to the hegemonic claim of beauty versus the "ugliness" of the 'other,' or his constant condemnation of the discrimination and violence to which African Americans were sub-

ject. Moreover, Martí's writing stands out for prioritizing the human rights of blacks and suggesting non-violent struggle as a way to attain them; it was for those very rights that he proclaimed he was willing to give even his life.<sup>31</sup>

#### Notes and Bibliography

1. Martí, José. *Obras completas* (Editorial Nacional de Cuba (1963-1966 XVIII): 284. Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are from this edition of the complete works of Martí.
2. See "Masking Hispanic Racism: A Cuban Case Study." In *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 6.4 (May 1999): 57-74, or in *La Lucha for Cuba: Religion and Politics on the Streets of Miami* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
3. Rojas, Rafael. *Martí, la invención de Cuba* (Editorial Colibrí, 2000): 114-115.
4. Rodríguez, Rolando. *Martí: Los documentos de Dos Ríos* (Santa Clara: Sed de Belleza, 2001): 42.
5. *Obras completas* XXI: 426.
6. *Obras completas* XI: 479.
7. Rodríguez, Rolando. *Martí: Los documentos de Dos Ríos* (Santa Clara: Sed de Belleza, 2001): 49.
8. *Obras completas* XI: 477.
9. See Fernando Ortiz. "Martí y las Razas," Ana Cairo (Ed.) *Letras. Cultura en Cuba* (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1989): 119.
10. Harris, Marvin. *El desarrollo de la teoría antropológica. Una historia de las teorías de la cultura* (Madrid: Siglo XXI de España Editores, 1979): 208-209.
11. See Jean Lamore, "Martí y las razas." In *Revista Casa de las Américas* XXXV: 198 (enero-marzo, 1995): 49-56.
12. *Obras completas* XXI: 431.
13. *Obras completas* XVIII: 357.
14. *Obras completas* XVIII: 358.
15. *Obras completas* XXI: 431-432.
16. *Obras completas* VIII: 442, 1884.
17. *Obras completas* II: 345.
18. *Obras completas* VII: 98.
19. *Obras completas* X: 374.
20. *Obras completas* XV: 373.
21. *Obras completas* XV: 387-392.
22. Taguieff, Pierre-André. *La force du préjugé. Essai sur le racisme et ses doubles* (Éditions La Découverte, 1987): 222 and 555).
23. *Obras completas* XV: 372.
24. *Obras completas* XI: 237.
25. *Obras completas* II: 251.
26. *Obras completas* XI: 72.
27. *Obras completas* VI: 20.
28. *Obras completas* XI: 277.
29. Taguieff, Pierre-André. *La force du préjugé. Essai sur le racisme et ses doubles* (Éditions La Découverte, 1987): 100.
30. *Obras completas* XXVIII: 290
31. *Obras completas* IV: 436.