

Founding Spirit. Rafael Serra y Montalvo

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Rafael Serra y Montalvo opposed racial hegemony and represented progressive thought in Cuba in his time. He was also a tireless worker for independence. Very few deserved the complete confidence that José Martí placed in Serra. So why doesn't Serra end up being more prominent in Cuban history? What is there left to say about this black autodidact, essayist, twice elected senator and journalist from Havana who founded newspapers and concerned himself with raising his race's level of education? What remains to be said after Deschamps Chapeaux's prized biography of him?

What is left to say that distinguishes Serra is not his effort in planning the war to free the Island from Spanish colonialism. It is also not his leadership in a black Cuban organization in New York, or his strict actions once Cuba became a deficient republic. Let us just say—already—that what is missing is an analysis of his deeply anti-racist ideology. To my knowledge, no one has researched the actual limits of that ideology, what it meant with regard to the Independent Party of Color—in summary, what plan he proposed in the face of inevitable protest.

If one looks back over a bibliography of race relations in Cuba, what one finds are fragments of Serra's work against racial discrimination, but they are just that—fragments that cannot spell out a coherent whole. Just consider what Deschamps and González Veranes wrote about him; and Ada Ferrer too, who calls him “a prominent black journalist,” and Aline Helg, who states that Serra's *The New Creole* “undermined the dominant ideology of white supremacy and questioned the myth of racial equality.”¹

I will use this last criterion to demonstrate if Helg is actually right. It will also serve to show if she is more than right in what she says—if that ends up being the case. All this will allow us to see if Martí exaggerated when in September 1890 he described Serra as a great and “founding spirit.”²

The first twenty years

He was born José Rafael Simón Agapito in the Monserrate neighborhood of Havana, in 1858; history would come to know him as just Rafael. His surnames were Serra and Montalvo. In his biography, Deschamps recalls that during the future activist's child-

hood blacks were prohibited from studying history, sketching, grammar and geography—all subjects that were considered wise knowledge by Captain General Domingo Dulce.

Although he spent his childhood in a poor neighborhood school, Serra had the luck to be born to free parents.³ Thus, if one considers that in the 1860s slavery still sustained the national plantocracy, even that little school was a privilege for a black child. Unfortunately, his luck would not last long. His father died when Serra was barely thirteen years old.

His family must have had some connections, because when he abandoned his studies to help support it he managed to find employment as a cigar factory apprentice—in a privileged working-class space that favored education. It was not for naught that the upper class opposed the efforts of those artisans to increase their knowledge, which they received via the soon-to-be famous cigar factory *lector* [reader].

Serra successfully took in the nation's reality, till the end of 1880s. On the one side there was Spain and its allies, who were committed to not abandoning the colony they had maximally exploited. On the other was the part of the population that left for the countryside in 1868, rebelling against abusive political, economic and social practices. Slavery was the most obvious of these; it was sustained with support from rich Creole sugar planters. The majority of the army that would fight the Ten Years War was made up of mostly blacks—freemen and slaves.

It was racial harmony that Serra sought when at twenty-one, while living in Matanzas, he established the Harmony Society for Instruction and Leisure. It offered, among other activities, free classes to 48 black and white children. A few months

earlier, in April of 1879, a young man who had recently arrived from France had founded a newspaper in Havana. Its name was precisely *La Fraternidad* and it fought for racial equality. That young man was Juan Gualberto Gómez.

Of course *La Fraternidad* was not alone, since there was another newspaper, *El Ciudadano* [The Citizen], which was trying to draw Cubans of African blood to the Spanish side. It might seem anecdotal that Martín Morúa Delgado, who was an up and coming intellectual, was one of the founders of the Harmony Society. He was one of ten such men and soon began to circulate *El Pueblo*, a much better defined newspaper, a weekly political publication that covered topics of general interest, too. The *El Pueblo's* logo reproduced an idea that was prevalent among black intellectuals at that moment—'there is no living without freedom.' Here 'freedom' is synonymous with abolition and equality. In launching a criticism against the "enemies of our race," what Morúa was saying [in his paper] was that the only thing African descendants wanted and for which they continued "to beg" was "a brotherly embrace and a book."⁴

It is hardly necessary to say that this was not the first time this black Cuban made a reference to a need to emphasize and increase educational opportunities. In a hegemonically Western society such as Cuba, there were many white 'advisors,' sympathizers and anti-racists who turned the subject into a long-lived discursive practice, if I may borrow a term from Foucault's *La arqueología del saber* [The Archaeology of Knowledge]. The island's republican State would take care of extending, deepening and rounding it out for its institutionalization. From time immemorial, it has been said that knowledge is power. Yet, according to this rhetoric, the blame for

black poverty did not fall on the republican regime that took slavery's place but rather on blacks, themselves, because of their lack of refinement.

One cannot totally ignore the influence in this situation of the American South's Reconstruction, during which a significant number of African descendants learned to read and write. Both Martí and Serra came to know this period, the former makes it known in one of his publications.⁵ Radical whites contributed to this massive literacy campaign, which was a historic feat for the black race. According to Berghe, Reconstruction was the closest thing to a social revolution in the United States.⁶

Exile

Despite the fact that there seemed to be a space opening up for a discussion of ideas—through the press—the capital soon put severe limitations on it, after a group of patriots, the black generals José Maceo, Guillermo Moncada, Cecilio González and Quintín Bandera among them, reinitiated the hostilities that in history would come to be known as the Guerra Chiquita [the Small War] (1879-1880), which lasted almost a year.

Many white ex Mambi soldiers kept away from this new war, others leaned towards Autonomism. But, the immediately positive response of high ranking black officers [to the hostilities] fueled a renewal of the racist campaign that accused Antonio Maceo—who did not participate in this insurrection, due to military jealousies and racial prejudices—of attempting to make himself the leader of a “Black Republic.” This type of fear had already reared its ugly head in 1868, as a response to the anti-slave and anti-colonial revolution that concluded in

Haiti, at the beginning of that century. It was real fear and, as such, a pretext for a propagandistic move to divide the island's nationalism. Even if it was Spain that was carrying out this campaign, rebellious whites on multiple sides certainly supported and fueled it.

Many men had to go into exile and many civilians were intensely persecuted during the months of the Guerra Chiquita. José Martí and Juan Gualberto Gómez had to leave, one shortly after the other. Martí went into exile; Gómez to prison. Serra, Morúa and other black intellectuals were already conspiring, in Matanzas, to mount a new struggle but Spain put an end to their work.

The foils to put them out of commission was to use a Colonel in the Fire Department to recruit them, place them under his control, and in that way destroy them. Morúa and Sierra both left for exile in the United States but would disagree about more than one national issue over time. Serra moved to New York after having fleetingly belonged to a separatist club in Key West. There he became part of a plan headed by Máximo Gómez and Antonio Maceo (1884). He was made Deputy Assistant to another black Cuban, Brigadier General Agustín Cebreco. The failure of that military action dispersed members of the San Jacinto expedition to numerous corners of the continent. In just a few months, Serra was back in New York.

Aside from conspiring, raise money for the future 1895 war, and working as a cigar maker, Serra kept up his work of teaching reading and writing to his black compatriots or, if they were already literate, improving their level of learning. It was often the case that black Cubans who fought in the independence wars or lived during those times went through an appreciably difficult period of readjustment or correction, in order to

build up their self-esteem, which had been battered by slavery. Because such a high number of them participated in the struggle, many of them felt quite proud (they saw themselves as Cuban gentlemen, citizens and thinkers).⁷ All this must have exerted a positive influence on Serra. A number of writers have alluded to this correction amongst the combatants, but no doubt those other black Cubans who did not fight on the battlefield also began to overcome a problem to which Albert Memmi and psychiatrist Franz Fanon dedicated many crucial pages—regarding the colonized. W.E.B. DuBois defined it as a layer of sediment that made black people suffer a permanent distortion in their personalities.⁸ Martí indicated a need to “increase the level of pride that blacks felt” for those who still suffered from said distortion.⁹

Against racist propaganda

If Spain and some of her followers were successful in convincing Cuban nationalism that the anti-colonial struggle would bring about a race war, they could ensure control over Cuba. This was one of the reasons that not just Martí but Maceo, Serra and others too, had to emphatically deny such a possibility. Serra, the cigar maker, condemned “the unfounded fears and even harmful precautions that many harbor against future and ethnic battles; against unnecessary and impossible wars.”¹⁰

This rhetoric of fear also explains a fundamental reason for there being no calls to protest or vindicating actions between the different independence wars. This does not mean that Juan Gualberto Gómez and his General Directory of Societies of Color totally abandoned the subject in Cuba. They were, in fact, successful in making less formal demands of Spain.

It took years for an anti-racist struggle to come about in two different places and at two distinct levels: one, among a number of those people who more publicly prepared for war in the United States; the other, in Cuba, particularly among members of the Directory. Notwithstanding, Martí, Maceo, Serra and even Juan Gualberto Gómez knew that planning for social battles with any real hope of success could only happen after the triumph of the revolution.

The history of Cuba requires one to reevaluate the anti-racism of the most progressive sectors of the Cuban nationalist movement of the late nineteenth century. The focus should not be so much on what was actually achieved but rather on what was criticized on the constant declarations concerning racial equality that would have to be put into practice, on the democracy that the war would make possible. Yet, this is not just about equality—the most important thing about this period was the realization of what method should be used to implement these social struggles.

For example, anyone who reviews the work of Martí and Maceo, for example, would be able to see that the latter was much more moderate in his criticism of discrimination, which means, of course, that he was actually successful in voicing them. But, Martí’s frequently lacerating opinions often kept the issue at the forefront of the Independist cause. If a leader like Maceo (who was black) had behaved thus, he would have been accused of being ambitious and wanting to put his race in power; if Martí did so, it was not possible for him to be attacked from the same angle. Martí’s anti-racist work garnered well-founded and great admiration from Antonio Maceo.¹¹

Serra, who was aware of the friction and difficult link between the actual war

effort and the demands for black rights, published his clearly Martí-inspired *Ensayos políticos* [Political Essays].

Martí, himself, reviews the book in one of the articles in his paper *Patria*: “One must truly feel love for those who suffer injustice; and those who suffer injustice should love their obligation to earn the consideration of others.” His lengthy quote from Serra’s *Ensayos políticos* continues:

“Though truths are often bitter, I should use this opportunity to warn everyone that if Cubans—who might generally lack the logic, goodwill and capacity for virile action—fight for a freedom that ‘is not with all or for the good of all,’ we will fight once and again, and we will die fighting...”¹²

These are Martí’s ideas too; Serra even paraphrases him. They both take a lead in combating the racism they know will continue to exist in the Republic. Just such a phrase from Serra, the kind Martí would have called ‘virile,’ would have been counterproductive if it came from Juan Gualberto Gómez in Cuba, or the Directory, which was the new war’s first theater of operations. Always fearful of corruption, Gómez did not write about what would happen after a revolutionary victory.

Cloaked in the respect they inspired, Martí and Serra did what for other black leaders, with their status, roles and contexts, was extremely difficult—they crossed the line more than once. They did this not just to try to achieve the very necessary and essential union of all Independists but also because of the relationship the hegemonic rhetoric had established between the independence struggle and the alleged ambition of blacks to control the country.

Let us focus, once again, on Martí, because it is impossible to understand Serra’s activism and ideology regarding race relations in Cuba without taking into account

his close and exemplary relationship with Martí, and the thorough analysis and interpretation he carried of the entirety of Martí’s work.¹³

La Liga

There is hardly anything known about the ties between Serra and Martí prior to the latter inviting the former to speak at a function commemorating another anniversary of the independence struggle, in October 1888. But it is in his general invitation to the Cuban community in New York where, instead of explaining what will take place at the meeting, he explains precisely the opposite, what there will not be at the meeting: “hateful divisions and punishable disdain”; he also convinces Serra of a decisive goal—“we are preparing the elements of a society that will atone.”¹⁴

This invitation was one of Martí’s most singularly anti-racist actions, something that Serra fully appreciated via all its consequences. The invitation served not only to visibly situate blacks at the heart of elite Cuban exile politics, but also in the context of a peaceful democracy, for when reparations would be needed. In addition, Martí also helped the voice of the subaltern—those who suffered discrimination—to be heard.

Serra passionately took up two subjects at his public appearances—Independence and equality. Of course, Martí had also invited the celebrated (white) General Emilio Núñez to speak against discrimination at the very same event, because many “consider blacks to be little more than beasts,” he wrote him. No one can doubt the connection between Serra’s probable anti-racist leadership in the future democracy and Martí’s decision to not authorize him to go to war in

1895, when his friend was ready to take his place as a soldier for the Liberating Army.¹⁵

The friendship between the two men grew more intense after 1888. Martí not only very directly praised Serra; he also made clear his intention to dedicate a book to him in the March 26, 1892 edition of *Patria*. For his part, Serra felt compelled to offer statements like “Martí is democracy” and construct him as the “Apostle,” saying these two things in a public defense of Martí.¹⁶

The Society for the Protection of Instruction, La Liga [The League], was another of Serra’s commitments.¹⁷ La Liga continued to operate, although differently from La Armonía, the one major difference being that Martí played a fundamental role in the former. Aside from procuring a great many of its teachers: he, himself, taught classes at the school, some of them free of charge, after earning enough to support himself by teaching other classes (scholars disagree as to what days of the week he did so). Like its predecessor, La Liga accepted poor white students.

Martí would use his time at La Liga to talk about equality, race relations, and how important it was to not passively put up with “haughtiness,” which is what he called a discriminatory attitude. Naturally, La Liga also became a breeding ground for anti-colonial combatants. The freedom enjoyed by La Liga’s students was obvious in the truly difficult questions Serra and others asked Martí, about things like the voyage of Anacarsis.¹⁸

Martí enjoyed the position and responsibility of being La Liga’s Head Supervisor and Honorary President. It was while teaching at this society that his lifelong title of “Maestro” [Teacher] came into use. Some even say that he came up with the idea of creating the newspaper *Patria* while working there. He was also the institution’s greatest

publicist; his writing on the subject is pretty well known. In one of his pieces he states that black workers pay for the school “by sacrificing their difficult salaries.” He doesn’t miss a chance to take an anti-racist stab against anyone who does not respect the efforts to better themselves of:

“...a few Cuban workers, black workers, those men of ours who from their work tables are trying to earn their wild and independent bread, an Education, from Spencer, or Iung’s Bonaparte, or The Life of Plutarch . . . , despite the fact that some useless people might find it amusing.”¹⁹

The establishment of La Liga was not an isolated incident. Many others like it cropped up throughout the United States and Cuba. According to Deschamps and Horrego Estuch, the Directory, which maintained close ties with Martí, took charge of those in Cuba. The authors point to the one in Key West too, the Gran Orden de Misioneros No. 1 (The Grand Order of Missionaries No. 1), which was of “a fraternal nature and was presided over by V. D. Juan Pascual.”²¹

In the Republic

To better understand Serra’s anti-racist ideology, one needs to get beyond many revolutionary efforts and unexpected events, disagreements, failures, disappointments, Martí’s death in combat, three years of war, the U.S. intervention and finally the founding of a Republic that was born oppressed, and not only because of the imposition of the Platt Amendment. One of the most manifest effects of this was the skilled way in which prejudices were used.

On two occasions Serra wins elections to the Senate—in 1904 and 1908—via his mil-

itancy in the so-called moderate National Party. But he had already criticized the Annexationists and Autonomists. He adduces that people who espouse this kind of ideology (the Autonomists were well known for the racism) were serving in high government positions to the detriment of capable Independents. He also did not spare his attacks on the courts, where just one, white man, who was very often prejudiced, meted out justice in extremely brief proceedings and allowed not one the right to appeal.

In his efforts to further defend Martí's ideas, for which purpose he maintained a section of his weekly *El Nuevo Criollo* [The New Creole] named for him, and published *La Doctrina de Martí* on the tenth anniversary of his death, Serra intensified his attacks against the neglect inflicted upon the black population. One must recall that even when most of Martí's work remained unpublished, Serra became one of the political leader's first and foremost interpreters. He really took to heart the line in which Martí talks about those "who are about to die for the rights of men, be they black or white"; this already resonated in Serra's work.²²

This is what made Serra feel certain that the "project of atonement" would not just be a bunch of useless words, because it was upheld by other attitudes and criteria. One example of this is the letter that the author of "Nuestra América" [Our America] (Martí) wrote to his black friend, Juan Bonilla, another La Liga student. In it he says to him: "these are just the preliminaries before a great campaign, a redeeming and active campaign, so much so that after it is over the evil would dare not to be so bad. This is how I have dreamt it and that is how everyone will see us do it."²³ The Republic, too, will serve this purpose, for a great anti-racist campaign.

By this time, Martí was sowing ideas so that in the future men like Serra would implement them: "I am fulfilling my role as a member of La Liga in way that is not yet obvious, but will be later."²⁴ Serra was to become one of those men who would "make it obvious later—in word and deed—by fulfilling his Martí-inspired debt." Here we see more clearly one of the reasons why Martí does not allow Serra to go off to war.

To the United States in search of experience

Perhaps, we have seen and understood enough from this background information to begin to examine Serra's anti-racist work in texts like *La república posible* [The Possible Republic], a posthumously published essay I consider to be his wisest and most combative analysis. Its tightly written twelve pages were published in October 1909, the same year Serra died. But, three years later, in 1912, an event related to Serra will shake the island, even though he is no longer alive.

One author assures us that Serra returned to the United States —no doubt briefly, since he was already a Representative— in the company of Evaristo Estenoz, "to visit with black organizations."²⁵ Estenoz, an ex Mambi lieutenant, would become the leader of the not yet established Independent Party of Color. One of their journey's objectives was to check out how African-Americans were developing their struggle for equality, something both Martí and Serra had done earlier. In fact, one of Serra's reasons for his anti-Annexionist stance was his belief that "annexation [to the United States] cannot be good for black Cubans, because they already know that when most Americans think of 'blacks,' justice, humanity and conscience cease to

exist.”²⁶ Notwithstanding, Serra also notes that although U.S. segregation is quite harsh, blacks (in the U.S.) progress more quickly than black Cubans. Once again, Serra was right.²⁷

Exiled in the United States, for more than two decades, he got to hear about Frederick Douglass, the first nationally known African American figure, someone whose career Martí follows in his chronicles (he also follows other personalities, like abolitionist and minister Henry H. Gamet, upon whose death in 1882 he devotes a praiseful poem). Surely all Cubans in the United States knew about the open solidarity expressed by African American organizations and people with Cuba’s independence cause, which due to its connection with black nationalism could be the subject of another article.²⁸

Yet, even though Booker T. Washington was garnering much of African America since prior to 1905, W.E.B. DuBois had already written a strong criticism of Washington, in a chapter of his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, which Serra probably read. Washington had offered the hegemonic Southern whites to accept the lack of rights and “some measure of segregation” in exchange for a promise to permit black participation in the economic growth Northern investment would generate in the South. His great banner was the industrial education of African Americans. It would serve us to recall that during his declining years DuBois withdrew his explosive anti-Washington criticism.

It was during this time that William Monroe Trotter (1872-1934) –who with George Forbes founded the relevant publication *The Boston Guardian* – was also active. It is noteworthy that this brilliant Harvard graduate, who ended up earning a Masters of Arts, signed the moving “Declaration of

Principles” with DuBois. In it they do not accept an inferior status or decrease their emphasis on civil rights. According to Serra, Trotter is considered a precursor of non-violent resistance.

The Niagara Movement, established to demand complete freedom of speech, unrestricted voting privileges and the abolition of any racially established distinctions, was founded in 1905. It reemerged in 1909 as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a multi-dimensional organization that exists even now. It was built by a somewhat amorphous mix of radicals like DuBois and Trotter, left over abolitionists and liberal, philanthropic and pro integration whites. Trotter would eventually separate himself from the NAACP on account of what he saw of white supremacy and financing, creating a sort of rival organization—the National Equal Rights League (NERL), another instrumental institution until it ceased to exist.

The twentieth century’s first years find African American leaders searching for ways to respond to racism. They try to get beyond the sluggishness, a certain inertia that affected the civil rights struggles of the late nineteenth century. Meanwhile, groups in Cuba were working to create the organizations that would later become part of the Independent Party of Color (PIC) but eventually fall victim to the cruelest continental repressions carried out during peacetime.

A major question

The question that remains after mentioning Serra and Estenoz’s trip to the United States is the following: with all his prestige, vast experience with anti-discriminatory newspaper battles and above all Martí’s obvious influence on him, would

Serra have changed the PIC's decision to pursue what some scholars call an armed a protest, massacre or the little war of 1912 if he had been alive?

No doubt there were many points of correspondence between Serra and the ex Mambi lieutenant. In his work, Serra notes the reappearance of the official newspaper of the Independents, *Previsión*: "isolated sparks are always a precursor to something great and concrete."³⁰ Serra makes other allusions to the country's situation just before he dies, in October 1909, at the early age of fifty-one.

It is precisely in *La república posible*, which is a homage to Martí, and where Serra publicizes a number of the most serious political, social, economic and racial ills of the moment, that he explains what he foresees for the civil struggles. He points to a central idea when he writes about "the just and decorous defensive campaign...blacks are carrying out—within the parameters of justice and the law—not to change the laws but rather how they are manifested."³¹ It is difficult now not to attempt to theorize peaceful resistance, an idea that, in fact, also came from Martí.

It would be a disservice to this topic to not bring to light at least of few of the phrases in which Martí makes reference to how the black struggle for rights should be. About African Americans he writes that at a conference they advocated for carrying out protests everywhere, an observation that in its ambiguity seems to suggest collective protest.³²

Of Serra he writes that he has "known how to be pure, without giving up anything or hating, despite the affronts of slavery."³³ Elsewhere, he indicates that Serra, "the slave descendant that he is, assists in the creation of free men, without ire or serenity."³⁴ Not

ceding to racism was the key to a forgiveness that would not give up in its demand for justice.

To defend and love are two incitements he also ascribes to Serra. In the aforementioned article, Martí reveals that Serra deals with "the holiest of ired with a saintliness that makes them useful."³⁵ Without meaning to be exhaustive here, I would like to make just minimal mention of the fact that as early as 1883 Martí, in countering Karl Marx's call for class struggle, proposes instead "a gentle solution to the evil." But he does not suggest this approach as a meek one that has to be carried out timidly but rather as one in which non-violent solutions are taught.³⁶ Thus, because these teachings of Martí are from the nineteenth century, Serra was exposed to the notion of peaceful resistance prior to publishing *La república posible*.

We will not go into current discussions about the porous borders of the term 'legality'—or other, perhaps more precise or parallel words than 'struggle' or 'peaceful resistance.' Nor is there room here to hypothesize about how Martí came to this concept. A comparison with Gandhi might do, because of Martí's complex religiosity and readings, a number of them coinciding with those the Indian hero declared helped him in arriving at the method. In his work, Martí alludes on more than one occasion to Henry David Thoreau, but it is not known if he read his famous *Civil Disobedience*.

On October 15, 1904, five years before his death (one year before his trip to the U.S.), Serra writes something obviously inspired by Martí in *El Nuevo Criollo*, which had declared itself in favor of mass education, the creation of public positions for blacks and against the Catholic church for not admitting blacks into their schools: "the battle for rights has begun," and this "strug-

gle” will be carried out in “an orderly and visible manner,” which is preferable, he adds, to becoming desperate or skeptical, which creates “dangerous rebelliousness or timidity.” It will be a peaceful struggle. In addition, this is how Martí spelled it out in relation to strikes and protests for workers’ rights.³⁸

In *La república posible*, Serra points to the “active popular sector” for the battle that has begun, to those who are lacking “the distinction of lineage.” These men already “understand each other and can agree.”³⁹ In his heart, in 1904, this black Cuban was already in tune with the heartbeat of the masses before Mohandas Gandhi created this method that brought him so much fame. Serra instills the future democratic republic’s circumstances with Martí’s concepts.

He does not offer just one brilliant interpretation of Martí’s thought—which precedes Gandhi’s; instead, at just the right moment, he offers a way to achieve black rights that comes to fruition with the movement started by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who in 1959 traveled to India to appreciate the place and conditions under which Gandhi developed his struggle (not unlike Serra and Estenoz, who went to the United States).

The connection

But, in practical terms and with regard to their activism, what is the real connection between Serra’s projects and those of the Independent Party of Color? One article, published in *Previsión*, seems to hold the answer, a reference to the prevailing idea of its leaders at that time, who only in 1909, once Serra was ill, agreed to an armed protest.⁴⁰ This newspaper (edited by Evaristo Estenoz, General Pedro Ivonet and journalist Gregorio Surín), which was considered

vital to strengthening the PIC, published an article under the title “Open Letter” saying: “No one has given thought to initiating an armed conflict because all men of color know exactly what would happen. . . . That is why our struggle is orderly and legal.”⁴¹

It was this view of peaceful resistance that Serra proposed and obligatorily presented to the Independents of Color, whose first meetings took place in 1908. He had to re-explain this orderly and legal struggle on many occasions, with Estenoz and other leaders. It was a way of negotiating and being able to agree. But it was also the path towards the reparation of which Martí spoke.

Let us focus on the fact that the “Open Letter” in *Previsión* said almost the same things we heard from Martí’s friend (Serra). Serra spoke about an “orderly and visible” struggle, “within the parameters of justice and the law,” and the newspaper characterized the method as “orderly and legal” (it had earlier been dismissed because it allowed the Independents [of Color] to become a party, and because of many other hegemonic pressures and repressive measures).

The Independent Party of Color was the first black political party in this hemisphere, but its most important theoretical antecedent was non-violent resistance, a combination of Martí and Serra’s vision. Author Tomás Fernández Robaina purposefully focuses on Martí’s ‘presence’ among the Independents, who justified the creation of the Party precisely because of the Republic’s failure with regard to Martí’s early vision of equality.⁴²

Serra makes direct reference to “dangerous rebelliousness” to avoid what might come later, a misconception that peaceful struggle was the first step in an armed struggle—not an unusual thing to assume when it came to

uprisings. It was often what people concluded when facing a political obstacle. Yet, Serra considered the status quo—remaining marginalized, or stepping back—equally dangerous.

One can once again appreciate Serra's impact on the Independents when after a meeting in Havana, in May 1912, one of its member groups proposed a continuance of the legal struggle. It is clear that Estenoz was personally opposed to an armed protest, but a survey conducted of the Party's committees throughout the island revealed that a vast majority of its membership was in favor of an uprising.⁴³ Ivonet and Estenoz were among the 3,000 to 6,000 blacks killed by the government during the 1912 protest; Estenoz's cadaver was put on public display, as was often done with famous criminals.⁴⁴

One must agree with Aline Helg about the fact that Serra struck a destructive blow to the island's dominant racist ideology, but more importantly, he gave full expression to a libertarian ideal in his society—passive resistance. As Serra says, if Martí truly “taught us to actively reject any form of tyranny, or arrogance,”⁴⁵ then between the two of them they came up with a clear idea about how to deal with these issues. There is no doubt they were both pioneers in their presentation of a method that today is considered absolutely essential for the achievement of equality and respect for the fundamental rights of man.

Founding precedence

Let us recall that it was at a September 11, 1906, meeting in the Empire Theatre of

Johannesburg that Gandhi was able to surpass the impediment that till then had kept him from connecting the concept of non-submission with his earliest religious sentiments—without hurting his peers. This solution came about in that theatre as a response to a recently passed South African law against the Indian community there—to humiliate it—by further limiting its already narrow rights.

The meeting ended with a solemn and general oath (“with God as my witness”) that they would not accept the Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance (a law that stipulated that if Indians had not registered in Transvaal [a city in South Africa] by a certain date they would not be able to remain).⁴⁶ His audience's unanimous decision was what inspired Gandhi to create a new form of socio-political resistance. Yet, even that first day could not really explain it—one of his best biographers states—because Gandhi, himself, did not quite understand it. On that date, he intuited what he would later spell out.⁴⁷ José Antonio Reyna agrees that Gandhi did not go to the meeting having premeditated this plan, with specific guidelines.⁴⁸

Yet, if the historical truth is told, even if in September 1906 the Indian hero began to work out a doctrine that would lead to a heretofore unseen method of resistance and politicking, this thinking had already been put into practice in Cuba. Martí and Serra's focus had already made it possible for Cuba to be an exception and successfully take up

the difficult path against racism. Shortly thereafter, however, the process and all hopes were shattered.

Notes

- 1- See Helg, Aline. *Our Rightful Share. The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995: 137); Deschamps Chapeaux, Pedro. *Rafael Serra y Montalvo: obrero incansable de nuestra independencia* (La Habana: UNEAC, 1974); González Veranes, Pedro. *Rafael Serra, patriota y revolucionario; fraternal amigo de Martí* (La Habana: Oficina del Historiador de La Habana, 1959); Ferrer, Ada. *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999): 124.
- 2- Martí, José. *Obras Completas XX* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales del Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1975): 372.
- 3- Deschamps does not establish a unique position, since soon after he quotes Serra, who says his parents were slaves. Deschamps Chapeaux, Pedro. *Op. Cit.* 23 and 29.
- 4- Deschamps Chapeaux, Pedro. *Op. Cit.* 35.
- 5- Martí, José. *Op. Cit.* X: 97.
- 6- Berghe, P. L. Van Den. *Problemas Raciales* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1971): 142. This author cites page 143 of the study *Black Reconstruction*, by W. E. B. DuBois, where he confirms that by 1870 4,200 schools have been established, with nearly 9,300 teachers and 24,000 students.
- 7- Martínez, Fernando. "Ricardo Batrell Empuña la Pluma". In *Espacios, Silencios y los Sentidos de la Libertad. Cuba entre 1878 y 1912* [Eds. Fernando Martínez, Rebecca J. Scott y Orlando García] (La Habana: UNION, 2001): 309.
- 8- Cited by Claudio Gorlier in *Historia de los negros de los Estados Unidos* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 1968): 218.
- 9- Martí, José. "Para las Escenas". *Anuario Martiano* (1978): 33-34. Other Independists became aware of this gain. Fermín Valdés Domínguez, Martí's closest white friend, indicated that "many men of color felt confident enough" to regret the negative effects of slavery and break the shackles of domination while in exile. Deschamps Chapeaux, Pedro. *Op. Cit.* 42.
- 10- Deschamps Chapeaux, Pedro. *Op. Cit.* 70.
- 11- Maceo said: [Martí] "with his incredible mind illuminates the shadows that slavery left on our people." Ramírez, Rafael, (ed). *Martí-Maceo: cartas cruzadas* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2003): 155.
- 12- Martí, José. *Op. Cit.* V: 201-202.
- 13- To get a notion of how Martí deals with the topic of anti-racism, see Miguel Cabrera Peña. *Cuba, el delirio y la historia* (Canada: Trafford, 2006): 77-127.
- 14- Deschamps, Chapeaux, Pedro. *Op. Cit.* 45.
- 15- Deschamps Chapeaux, Pedro. *Op. Cit.* 107.
- 16- Serra, Rafael. "Martí es la Democracia." In *Anuario del Centro de Estudios Martianos* (La Habana: ACEM, 1982): 273.
- 17- Deschamps Chapeaux, Pedro. "El Directorio de Sociedades de Color y la Guerra del 95." In *Anuario del Centro de Estudios Martianos* (La Habana: ACEM, 1982).
- 18- Martí José. *Op. Cit.* XX: 372.
- 19- Martí, José. *Op. Cit.* V: 267.
- 20- Deschamps Chapeaux, Pedro. *Rafael Serra y Montalvo. Op. Cit.* 66; Also, Horrego, Estuch L. Juan Gualberto Gómez: un gran inconforme (La Habana: Ciencias Sociales, 2004): 57.
- 21- From the introduction to Leopoldo Horrego Estuch's, *Martín Morúa Delgado: vida y mensaje* (La Habana: Sánchez, 1957), and from the name Juan Pascual which is repeatedly mentioned in relation with an institution in Key West; research Enrique Sosa suggests, and probably rightly so, that the Orden of Missionaries No. 1 was made up of Abakuas and Nānigos (practitioners of two different

- African religions) about which Martí would so eloquently write. Sosa wonders if “that was the example followed by other Nāñigo societies in Cuba. The Directory’s patriotic work does not seem logical if it didn’t apply to Nāñigo “spaces” in Cuba, or at least some of them. For more details, see Sosa, Enrique. “Nāñigos en Key West (¿1880-1923?).” *Catauro. Revista Cubana de Antropología* 2: 3 (enero-junio 2001): 159-171.
- 22- Martí, José. Op. Cit. IV: 436.
 - 23- Martí, José. Op. Cit. XX: 424.
 - 24- Ibid.
 - 25- Helg, Aline. Op. Cit. 142.
 - 26- Deschamps Chapeaux, Pedro. Op. Cit. 148.
 - 27- A substantial a social statistical figures in G. Woodson Carter and Charles H. Wesley’s *The Negro in Our History* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1962): 449-459), and those from about 1900 in Cuba analyzed by Alejandro de la Fuente in *Una nación para todos. Raza, desigualdad y política en Cuba 1900-2000* (Madrid: Colibri, 2001): 204 and 215, reveal an overwhelming difference favoring African Americans (although one must take into account the much larger size of the U.S. black population).
 - 28- Foner, S. Philip. *A History of Cuba and its Relations with the United States* (New York: International Monthly Review, 1962): 243, and Frederick Douglass 2 (New York: Citadel Press, 1964): 288. On black nationalism, see Brock, Lisa. “Regreso al Futuro. Cuba entre los Afronorteamericanos.” *Temas* 8 (octubre-diciembre 1996) and Cole, Johnnetta B. “Afro-American Solidarity with Cuba.” *Black Scholar* 8-10 (1977): 73-80. There is more information about solidarity and their mutual knowledge of each other in Brock, Lisa y Castañeda, Digna (eds). *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans Before the Cuban Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).
 - 29- Harlan, Louis R. Booker T. Washington. *The Wizard of Tuskegee 1901-1915* (Oxford University Press, 1983): viii.
 - 30- Deschamps Chapeaux, Pedro. Op. Cit. 180.
 - 31- Serra, Rafael. *La república posible. Obra póstuma* (N.p., 1909).
 - 32- Martí, José. Op. Cit. XI: 264.
 - 33- Martí, José. Op. Cit. V: 202. Martí expresses similar concepts in XX: 473, IV: 380, IX: 388.
 - 34- Deschamps, Chapeaux Pedro. Op. Cit. 47.
 - 35- Martí, José. Op. Cit. IV: 380.
 - 36- Martí, José. Op. Cit. IX: 338.
 - 37- For more details about Serra’s work, see Aline Helg. Op. Cit. 133-137, among other.
 - 38- José Mestas’s work is essential in this case. *El pensamiento social de José Martí: Ideología y cuestión obrera* (Madrid: Editorial Pliegos, 1993).
 - 39- Highlighting mine.
 - 40- It is during 1909 that the Party’s rhetoric “turned violent.” Helg, Aline. Op. Cit. 164.
 - 41- Highlighting mine. Pérez, Antonio, “Carta Abierta.” *Previsión* (24 de mayo de 1910): 7.
 - 42- Fernández Robaina, Tomás. *El negro en Cuba 1902-1958. Apuntes para una historia de la lucha contra la discriminación racial* (La Habana: Ciencias Sociales, 1994): 108.
 - 43- Fernández Castro, Silvio. *La masacre de los independientes de color en 1912* (La Habana: Ciencias Sociales, 2002): 85.
 - 44- These two figures are the cause of different estimates, although the truth can never be known. Helg, Aline. Op. Cit. 225.
 - 45- Deschamps Chapeaux, Pedro. Op. Cit. 116.
 - 46- Nanda, B. R. *Gandhi* (España: Ediciones Cid, 1960): 113.
 - 47- Nanda, B R. Op. Cit. 113-114.
 - 48- Reyna, José A. *Gandhi y la no violencia* (Venezuela: Monte Ávila, 1991): 61.