

# “Martí and Lenin” and a Cuban Mulatto Between Two Marxes

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“**M**artí y Lenin” is one of Juan Marinello’s most controversial essays.<sup>1</sup> In 1934, when he wrote it, he did not even own that rich, bold and very personal prose piece for which Antonio Machado called him the glory of all the Spains. By the 1930s, the poet and the writer were becoming familiar with the burgeoning socialist struggle. As Gabriela Mistral used to say of him, Marinello was doing whatever he needed to do to get where he wanted to go. Of course, when the Chilean poet tried to characterize Marinello’s future during a conference in Cuba, she did it thinking that the lofty place he would reach as a writer and human being would produce a free society in which the essayist would be able to remain free.

By 1934, this son of Jicotea, in the old province of Las Villas, who renounced his family’s sugar mill inheritance, was already close to the communists. It must be said that it was those communists who were often the greatest defenders of the rights of blacks, and who created the only political party (after the massacred Independents of Color) whose leadership, and rank and file, included wellknown black figures and intellectuals. A

nearly unknown prologue by Armando Guerra to a mediocre book, *José Martí y los negros* (1947), is one of Marinello’s most relevant texts on the subject.

What remains of Marinello’s work today is a handful of texts, particularly about José Martí’s work, a number of sketches of other figures, as well as his book about Cuban poetry, *Liberación* (1926). Criticism and history are responsible for the aging of much of his work. Perhaps his best-known misstep was his critique of *modernismo* and Rubén Darío, in which he criticized both the movement and its founder. After 1959, the new regime gave him a higher position, with more responsibility. He died while president of an assembly domesticated under the control of the island’s only party. Did he get to where he wanted to go?

Regarding “Martí y Lenin,” most critics have paid much more attention to what most of them consider Marinello’s errors in evaluating Martí’s work. His position differed 180 degrees from that of most others. Yet, his resignification of Martí’s work has hardly been studied, however this paucity cannot be attributed to the literary critics, since both

the author of *Contemporáneos* (1964) and the regime established in post-1959 Cuba drew a steel-like curtain of silence around his 1934 essay.

The Marinello text that concerns us here includes an anecdote about Paul Lafargue, who was at the center of a publicity campaign little more than thirty years ago, in Cuba, where and when all newspapers belonged and continued belonging to the government (as everyone knows). This campaign was about trying to connect Cuba to the family of Karl Marx through his son-in-law (Lafargue), who was married to the second daughter (Laura) of the person (Marx) who in Cuba was being called the Prometheus of Tréveris. In my opinion, the campaign's greatest achievement was bringing about the creation, in 1972, of the Pablo Lafargue Institute for Translators and Interpreters.

But in "Martí y Lenin," Marinello tells the story of a group of distinguished Cubans that tries to get close to Marinello, but "he chills their enthusiasm upon aggressively and rudely telling them that he is more interested in the election results of Paris's worst neighborhood than in Cuba's independence." If Marinello's text had been ignored, this campaign to link Marx and Cuba would not have taken place. Marx's son-in-law, who had been a participant in the Paris Commune, did not feel Cuban. While this is not a good excuse, he was apparently uninterested in the island's independence.

The Cuban writer most associated with Lafargue was Alejo Carpentier. In one of his most important essays, he wrote that Lafargue "often said that in his veins flowed the blood of two oppressed races: Indians and blacks."<sup>2</sup> According to Carpentier's text, published originally in 1975, Lafargue was a mulatto who was born in Santiago de Cuba, in 1842.

It is difficult to believe Carpentier, whose essay may have motivated the campaign that exploited the Marx clan's island pedigree, when he wrote that "Lafargue's character was so *criollo* that Karl Marx, who felt his son-in-law displayed some evidence of Proudhonism, wrote Engels in a letter that he was going to have to bust his son-in-law, Pablo's, stubborn, *criollo* head." For the same person who penned *Los pasos perdidos* (1949)—his best novel, in my opinion—his particular interpretation of Marx's phrase was not enough. He knew that calling Lafargue a *criollo* was most important. Almost immediately, Carpentier maintains that Lafargue "was still the same Cuban he always was." The subjective nature of this affirmation about Lafargue's identity, which today we know was multiple, split, and transferable, was not enough for Carpentier, who tells us that Lafargue did not go work in Cuba "because it was absurd for him to try to take Marxism to Cuba while it was still a colony of Spain." Why should we believe this last thing attributed to Carpentier, when we already know that Lafargue couldn't care less about Cuba's independence?

Carpentier's construction of Lafargue served the Cuban regime, in that it ordered its journalists to propagate and appropriate this Marxist pedigree in which few Cubans—except those in hegemonic power—were interested. This allowed them to validate the ideology they were imposing, because of this Marxist heritage in Cuba. Yet, Carpentier's Marx quote does not confirm Lafargue's *criollo* credentials. Instead—what should be interesting to us—is that it is one more of many examples of Marx and Engel's racial prejudice. These co-authors of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), included in their text not only *mestizos* and blacks, but even Marx's own people, Jews. Thus, Marx must have dis-

liked Lafargue's line about being proud of his Indian and black lineage.<sup>3</sup>

Carpentier, the author of *El siglo de las luces*, himself must have doubted the so-called historicity of this section of his essay, particularly when he decided to write a fiction novel about him. Its title, *Verídica historia*, is surprising. This was the destiny Lafargue's biography deserved, at least as far as Cuba was concerned. It should be considered part imagination and part invented. One of Cuba's most important writers died on April 1980, with a sheet of paper in his typewriter.

### *Time passed and Lafargue...*

The passage of time saw some of the details become clearer, at least as much as this can come about in Cuba. Of course, there is a principal impact, which is that the regime must admit that it carried out either an erroneous propagandistic campaign or the worst, fantastic fabrication, so that Cuba could appear on Marx's genealogical tree. In an article published by the National Information Agency, an historian as serious as Dr. Yoel Cordoví wrote that the relationship between Marx and Lafargue became close when the second married Laura, but he admits that they really got to understand each other "after some degree of mistrust on the part of her father regarding the Latin liveliness of her fiancé."<sup>4</sup> This emphasis on Lafargue's Latin origin was not about him being from Cuba, but rather from France. I am also almost certain that today we could interpret that concern about Lafargue's mulatto origin, something that everyone can agree with.

Having arrived in eastern Cuba, specifically to Santiago, from Louisiana—and no doubt from this region's French area—one can assume that at one time or another his

family lived on Gallo Street, where most French immigrants lived, according to Cordoví. It would not be a stretch to also say that Santiago was closer to France than to Cuba. The origin of the *criollo* nature that Carpentier notes in this author of *El derecho de la pereza* (1880) is not clear. This is why I believe that the Latin nature Marx sees in him must come from the fact that he is from the same country as the already famous Víctor Hugo.

I'd like to digress a bit on the subject of *El derecho de la pereza*. What Lafargue wants to do is criticize the personal devastation wrought by nineteenth-century capitalism. Basing himself on his prior reality, Lafargue proposes that there should be no more than three hours a day. I have no doubt that this position was truly far-sighted, if one considers the world's—our world's—future, technological advances—and their efficiency:

"If the working class, after abandoning the vice that controls it, and spoiling its nature, rose up with all its might, not to demand the Rights of Men (which are nothing more than the right to be poor), but rather to forge an inviolable law to prohibit all men from working more than three hours a day, the Earth, this old Earth, would quake with joy; we would feel a new universe tremble in her."<sup>5</sup>

Even if the offer is tempting, what Lafargue perhaps lacked was the vision to foresee that even in his circle, people like Lenin would come around and oppose such a restful workday, and create the concept of voluntary work quicker than even the assumed Cuban. It is clear that if Lafargue's proposal had been implemented, Lenin would have extended the workday from three to who knows how many hours. Here ends my digression.

As the Revolutionary Palace's bureaucracy tends to say, it may not have been the ideologically right time to reveal Lafargue's

refusal to get involved at all in the independence struggle of the land where he was born. Or, it may be the case that Cordoví forgot to mention the decisive anecdote that Marinello tells in “Martí y Lenin.” Surely, some member of the delegation that went to visit the son-in-law of the philosopher-author of *Das Kapital* (1861) told the story to someone.

If Cordoví wrote his text with academic discretion, little more than three years later, Juan Morales Agüero, a journalist with a graduate degree in Communications, clearly shows what the regime’s purpose was from the very first paragraph on: “coincidence wanted a compatriot of ours to be a brother of Karl Marx,” and then “That compatriot’s name? Pablo Lafargue.”

If we did a critical, discursive analysis of this, in the style of Teun A. Van Dijk, we would automatically see that the words ‘Cuba’ and ‘Cuban’ are among the most repeated that shed light on the obvious intention to link Lafargue with the island’s historic legacy—and this is without also considering the two in the first paragraph—‘compatriot’ and ‘countryman.’ Morales insists on writing that Lafargue was the paternal grandson of a Haitian mulatto woman, and the maternal grandson of a Cuban Indian. Among the French socialist’s many battles, imprisonments, and struggles, Morales (writing in March 2010, for *Juventud Rebelde*) talks about certain biographers who censure Lafargue for his nearly total lack of interest in Cuba’s nineteenth-century, independence cause.<sup>6</sup>

It is noteworthy that he felt almost no solidarity, as is told in a story submitted by the journalist about a delegation of Cuban patriots that visited him to ask for support for the war against Spain. Lafargue’s response to them was: “One strike in France is worth more than all Cuban wards.” According to

this version of Lafargue’s answer, Morales’s use of ‘almost’ is pretty harmless, despite the fact it hides or ignores “the rude aggressivity” to which Marinello refers, and also seems so ridiculous.

In another country, not one like Cuba, one might be able to attribute the lack of biographical information about Lafargue to the brief and fleeting nature of print journalism. It seems that Lafargue was plagued by problems no matter where he went. A number of his encounters with other working-class leaders are attributed to his attempts to exercise a Lafargue-style, rigid, radical, and uncompromising kind of Marxism at a time when Possibilism—the result of negotiation and commitment with political adversaries—was popular amongst a number of people in different European countries. It is said that the way in which Lafargue practiced socialism in France caused a split in French socialism, in 1882.

Yet, if something clearly shows that Lafargue’s identity politics had nothing to do with Cuba, or with any sort of Cuban *criollo* culture, it was the way he died: serenely, undramatically, silently, uncolorfully, in a European way. In 1911, Lafargue and Laura injected themselves with a lethal dose of cyanide, because they understood that their age was causing them to lose their mental faculties. After their hearts stopped, the rest of the story is known via a note he himself wrote: “I die extremely joyously because I am sure that the cause to which I have given myself for forty-five years will soon triumph.” A Cuban communist—particularly of our contemporary ones—would think very differently. If the cause were to triumph, it would be better to live and perhaps see the triumph. It would be more logical to await the victory while still in power. There is less desperation when waiting in that manner.

#### Notes:

- 1- Carlos Ripoll quotes «Martí y Lenin» in *Repertorio Americano* 30 (January 26, 1935) <[http://www.eddosrios.org/marti/Falsifica\\_en/notes.htm](http://www.eddosrios.org/marti/Falsifica_en/notes.htm)>. Olivia Miranda offers another title and year of publication: *Masas* 1: 6 (octubre-noviembre de 1934); «Martí en Marinello: identidad cultural y pensamiento revolucionario,” *Revista Bimestre Cubana* 27: 140-167. All the Marinello quotes are taken from Jorge Camacho’s text “Un texto cautivo: ‘Martí y Lenin,’ de Juan Marinello” <[http://www.habanaelegante.com/Archivo\\_Marti/Marti\\_CamachoMarinello.html](http://www.habanaelegante.com/Archivo_Marti/Marti_CamachoMarinello.html) (2010)>.
- 2- Carpentier, Alejo. “Problemática del tiempo y el idioma en la moderna novela latinoamericana,” in Saúl Sosnowski (ed). *Lectura crítica de la literatura americana. Vanguardias y toma de posesión III* (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1997): 530.
- 3- See Weyl, Nathanie. *Karl Marx, racist*. Nueva York: Arlington House, 1979; and Cabrera, Miguel. “Los clásicos prejuicios. ¿Fueron racistas Carlos Marx y Federico Engels?” <<http://arch1.cubaencuentro.com/internacional/20051021/dd1f5d5e98080ee9dde2a6d1598d627d/1.html>>.
- 4- Cordoví, Yoel. “Natalicio 165 de Pablo Lafargue,” *Juventud Rebelde* (enero 13 de 2007).
- 5- Lafargue, Pablo. *El derecho a la pereza* <http://es.scribd.com/doc/12598676/Paul-Lafargue-El-Derecho-a-La-Pereza>.
- 6- Morales, Juan: «El yerno cubano de Marx», *Juventud Rebelde*, marzo 23 de 2010.