

Our Own Greece: Contributions of José Martí to Liberal Democratic Theory

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Scholars have struggled for over a century to understand which philosophical traditions are most influential in the development of José Martí's political thought. This paper explores the interactions between Martí and the North American Transcendentalist movement, attending most closely to their shared foundation in liberal democratic theory. I argue that Martí looked for inspiration from individuals who stood apart from industrial consumerism in the United States, namely Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. In particular, Martí shared their perspective of the Western Hemisphere's understudied and underexplored frontier as a foil for European positivism. Moreover, studying Martí's interactions with the ideas of Emerson and Whitman will help us understand both Martí's works and the Transcendentalist tradition more broadly. Ultimately, I maintain that the influence of liberalism on the thought of Martí is evidenced by his argument for liberal notions of ethnic and racial equality that precede, as well as influence, the movement toward the existence of an independently sovereign Cuban nation-state.

Interpretations of Martí: Krausism and civic humanism

José Julián Martí y Pérez was born in 1853 in La Habana, Cuba. Cuban nationalism and the cause for independence from Spain were both issues that Martí took on early in life. At age 16, he was imprisoned for writing for a newspaper that was considered seditious toward Spain. However, due to his gaunt frame and fragile health, Martí fell ill after just six months of his seven-year sentence of hard labor. He was subsequently deported to Spain in 1871, and spent little of the remainder of his life in Cuba. Following his education in Zaragoza, Spain, Martí traveled throughout Latin America before settling in the United States until his death. Although Martí's philosophy evolved significantly over the course of his lifetime, his focus was always the achievement of Cuba's independence from Spain. Martí shared with North American Transcendentalists the goal of identifying or authoring a philosophical identity that was independent from the dominating influences of Western European colonization.

From an ethnocentric European lens, there is no philosophical tradition original to North or South America. From this perspective, the earliest scholarly philosophy that originated in Latin America belongs to the tradition of liberalism (Nuccatelli, 2014). The assumption of Western superiority is so deeply embedded in the West that many still regard the Americas as the "New World," one that necessitated discovery by foreign entities before it could properly develop and mature intellectually. Spanish and Portuguese colonialism yielded a Latin American philosophical tradition founded, at least in part, on the ideas of liberty and equality that developed in Enlightenment-era European contexts. Although a truly comprehensive analysis of Latin American political thought would include works from the time before Western conquest, I focus on the

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influences of Western philosophy on Martí's contributions to the discussion of Latin American philosophical identity. However, Martí's political theories are most closely associated with the Western philosophical traditions of Krausism and civic humanism.

Martí's political theories focus mainly on Cuban nationalism (or patriotism) and transnational Latin American solidarity. Susana Rotker (2000) posits that Martí's global interpretation of identity does not recognize the tangible differences and diversity among Latin American states and politics. Although his lifelong goal was to attain Cuban independence, it is quite clear that his works today have influenced far more politics than in Cuba alone. Rotker (2000) continues that Martí's works, which include those influenced by North America, eternally display their Spanish American association. His belief in the ability of Latin Americans to lay claim to a legitimate philosophical identity is closely aligned with the contemporary "culturalist" perspective held by some scholars of Latin American thought. This culturalist perspective can help create an individualistic Latin American political philosophy based on self-development "using whatever means they have found appropriate to do so" (Gracia, 2013). In concurrence with modern culturalists, Martí asserts that "culture [warrants] consideration regardless of its place of origin as long as it [does] not merely imitate foreign tradition or reject its own" (Rotker, 2000).

The scholarship on the foundations of Martí's political theories reveal persuasive arguments that identify his Krausist leanings. The fact that Martí's education took place in Spain, the center of Krausist thought in the nineteenth century, adds support to this notion. The Krausist tradition emerged from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the paradigmatic thinker of the European Enlightenment. Krausism stresses "harmonic rationalism," which is thought of as humankind's ability to reconcile religion and reason through the perfectibility of human logic (Turton, 1986).

Martí's relation to Krausism is reflected in the shared belief that individuals must forgo their individuality through an educative process to achieve a spiritual homogeneity in society. This element of Krausism is decidedly republican in nature, emphasizing the importance of collective action rather than individual liberties. Liberalism emphasizes that individuals are naturally equal to one another, whereas republicanism contends that individuals are made equal to one another by virtue of their shared citizenship in a given republic. He also subscribes to Krausist thought insofar as he reveres nature and its ability to improve human life through direct contact; Krausists are credited as the first philosophers to emphasize physical fitness and contact with nature (Turton, 1986). However, his philosophy does not subscribe to the Krausist tradition as it emerged in Spain, wholesale. The most important distinction lies in the Krausists' interpretation of reason as capable of proving the existence of God, an alternative to Kant's faith in human reason. While Krausism purports that human reason can identify the existence of God, Martí places his faith in intuition and consequently takes a critical stance toward positivism.

Indeed, Martí's political philosophy never escaped his Judeo-Christian roots. But, North American Transcendentalists like Emerson and Whitman inspired Martí's spirituality far more than his Roman Catholic upbringing. In fact, civic humanism is considered by some to be the most conceivable inspiration for Martí's thought. Clive Kronenberg (2014) asserts, "Martí's humanist critique is situated squarely on the side of victims, waving the banner of human dignity and equality as well as of solidarity with the disfavored" (p. 28). Myriad facets of this argument are problematic, not least of

which is that Martí's political thought always operated in the context of Latin America's liberation from Spain, particularly Cuba. To paint Martí as a humanist is to discredit him as a political revolutionary. Furthermore, civic humanism is thought to have emerged from the republican tradition. Martí explicitly maintains a belief in individual liberties and rights, a fact that potentially subverts any argument for a connection between him and republicanism (Moulakis, 2011).

Martí and North American Transcendentalism

As a journalist living in late-nineteenth century New York City, Martí lived in a culture of consumerism the likes of which he had not yet seen. Industrial consumerism in the U.S. was spurred on by the country's philosophical foundations in Anglo liberalism. Lockean and Hobbesian notions of private property and hyper-individualism, respectively, had transformed industrial consumerism from an undercurrent to a riptide. North American Transcendentalism was the intellectual tradition he was most drawn to as he sought to critique the side effects of hyper-individualism. Namely, he looked to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, who significantly impacted not only Martí's creative prose, but also the development of his political theory. Therefore, studying Martí's interactions with the ideas of Emerson and Whitman showcase both Martí's works and the Transcendentalist tradition more broadly. An analysis of Martí's comments on Transcendentalism lends itself to a clearer understanding of his philosophical foundation in liberalism.

To understand the Transcendentalists' critiques of positivism, as well as their emphasis on intuition and creation, I will review these arguments as presented in Emerson's essay *Nature*. In his introduction, he writes, "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?" (Emerson, 1849).

Credited as the founder of the Transcendentalist movement, Emerson is concerned about the originality of his thought and with the U.S. as separate from Europe. So profound is the significance he places on originality that he even questions the dogmatic religions of his ancestors. He later claims, "Idealism is a hypothesis to account for nature by other principles than those of carpentry and chemistry" (Emerson, 1849). In this context, "idealism" is interchangeable with "intuition," and is synonymous with Emerson's critique of positivism as derived from the European Enlightenment. "Carpentry" and "chemistry" represent mechanisms of cause and effect that Emerson's political philosophy endeavors to complement with intuition, which does not follow positivist rationalism.

In a revealing essay entitled *The Afternoon of Emerson*, Martí identifies the shared ideas that connect him with Emerson. The overarching theme of Martí's praise for his contemporaries in the U.S. takes on a form of Judeo-Christian thought that manages to escape institutionalized religion without abandoning faith in God. He writes, "...the Creator dwells within every man and every created thing has something of the Creator within it and all will ultimately flow into the bosom of the Creating Spirit" (Martí, Allen, González Echevarría, 2002). The conviction that all things are created in God's image is one of many inspired by Martí's Judeo-Christian heritage and culture.

Martí goes on to note his approval of Emerson's critical stance toward government: "[Emerson] was not a man of his nation; he was a man of the human

nation...He followed no system, for that struck him as the act of a blind man or a servant; he believed in no system, for that struck him as the act of a weak, low, and envious mind” (Martí et al., 2002, p. 119). Later, I will discuss how Martí and Emerson share a belief in the *practice* of liberal democracy, rather than conceptualizing it as a system of governance. Martí’s support for a philosophical identity indigenous to Latin America, in concert with his opposition to dominance by Western governments and philosophies, acts as the basis for his critical stance against contemporary movements like Marxism.

Perhaps the most significant moment in his written meditation on Emerson is Martí’s challenge to the European Enlightenment: “But [Emerson] does not believe that reason alone is capable of penetrating the mystery of life and bringing peace to man and putting him in possession of the means to grow. He believes that intuition completes what reason commences” (Martí et al., 2002, p. 128). This exemplifies the broader Latin American tradition of criticizing positivism and defending intuition, spirituality, and even theism. Indeed, this passage is one of Martí’s most profound contributions to Latin American philosophical identity. The argument against the perfectibility of humankind’s rationality may not have originated with Martí, but his voice serves to further legitimize the critique of European thought through his interactions with other intellectuals like Emerson. Such a challenge to positivism is significant to our understanding of Latin American philosophical identity, not as a product of Western cause and effect, but rather as an organic and unique tradition founded on the balance between reason and intuition.

A similar essay, *The Poet Walt Whitman*, delineates Martí’s admiration for Whitman’s contributions to Transcendentalism. Therein, Martí declares the existence of an authentic non-Western philosophical identity: “The free and decorous life of mankind on a new continent has created a sane and robust philosophy that voyages out to the world in athletic stanzas” (Martí et al., 2002, p. 185). It is relatively clear that Martí credits Transcendentalism as a philosophy original to the Western Hemisphere expressed through a respect for and unity with nature. “[Whitman] is of every caste, creed, and profession and finds justice and poetry in them all. He takes the measure of the religions without ire, but believes that the perfect religion is in Nature” (Martí et al., 2002, p. 188). There is an inherently democratic element of nature that pervades Martí’s mature works and legacy. In a democratic public, as in nature, every citizen’s growth and development ought to occur organically and within the context of the greater environment or republic. This Transcendentalist lens reinforces the conviction that Latin American philosophy can and ought to exist, and that such a philosophy does not need cultivation by Western civilization.

In his essay on Whitman, Martí once again claims that strict ideologies must not be adopted from foreign policies; he proclaims, “He who lives under an autocratic creed is like an oyster in its shell, seeing only the prison that traps him and believing, in the darkness, that it is the world” (Martí et al., 2002, p. 187). Martí argues that democracy is a practice of governance instead of a system or structure – it ought to appear in every polity without outside influence at the core of the principles of governance or political practice. Offering another critique of Marxism, Martí advises citizens to follow Whitman’s approach: “Breed and add to the world instead of quarrelling, he scolds the skeptics, sophists, and chatterers: believe with the ardor of the faithful who kiss the altar’s steps” (Martí et al., 2002, p. 188). However, Martí’s criticism of Marxist

revolutionaries seems to be hypocritical on some level, considering the former's antagonistic role toward Spain. It seems unfair of Martí to criticize Marxist philosophy for inciting rebellion and occasionally violence when Martí himself spent a lifetime garnering support for a military rebellion against Spain. This might signal his misunderstanding of communism as a blueprint for violent class warfare rather than a system that, like democracy, could grow organically anywhere.

The interactions between Martí and North American Transcendentalists like Emerson and Whitman help us to better understand the former's philosophy from a Western perspective. The Transcendentalist tradition was founded on the principle, stated in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, that "all men are created equal." This notion may be understood as inherently liberal due to its focus on individual rights and liberties that precede the existence of a polity. Martí, in part, is certainly influenced by the liberal tradition, but it is difficult to place his ideas entirely in a liberal framework because of their nuance. While he stresses the significance of individual liberties on the one hand, Martí partially echoes Plato's republican ideal on the other: a polity that cultivates justice through public instruction (Abel, 1986, p. 146). Despite Martí's occasionally republican sentiments, I will show that Martí's political theory was significantly influenced by Transcendentalist notions of intuition and creation.

Liberal democratic theory in *Nuestra América*

Martí's *Nuestra América* constitutes the culmination of his contributions to Latin American philosophical identity. Therein lie some of his most explicit arguments for Cubans' right to self-determination and independence from Spain. Beyond his claims for a free Cuba, however, he articulates a cross-national Latin American spirit that is indicative of the sphere of his contemporary influence. Through an analysis of the following passages from *Nuestra América*, I will argue that the influences of Transcendentalism on Martí's political thought suggest his foundation in liberalism. Furthermore, I will contend that understanding Transcendentalism as a multicultural effort to author a political and philosophical identity original to the Western Hemisphere will allow us to better understand the intent of Martí's works.

Shortly after the text's introduction, Martí (2002) articulates his philosophical foundation in democracy:

To govern well, one must attend closely to the reality of the place that is governed. In America, the good ruler does not need to know how the German or Frenchman is governed, but what elements his own country is composed of and how he can marshal them so as to reach, by means of institutions born from the country itself, the desirable state in which every man knows himself and is active, and all men enjoy the abundance that Nature, for the good of all, has bestowed on the country they make fruitful by their labor and defend with their lives. The government must be born from the country. The spirit of the government must be the spirit of the country. The form of the government must be in harmony with the country's natural constitution. The government is no more than an equilibrium among the country's natural elements (p. 290).

In this passage, he explicitly argues that every polity must be governed by an institution born of that polity, and that every citizen must be “active.” Moreover, he hypothesizes that the role of the state includes a responsibility to its citizens to foster their liberty and capacity to enjoy nature. These two elements of the passage are strongly suggestive of his nuanced democratic philosophy that is, at times, seemingly more republican than liberal in nature.

While entertaining his republican notions, one cannot help but wonder what fundamental ideal Martí’s philosophy seeks to share or accomplish. Plato argues in his *Republic* that the aim of government ought to be a just order of state-educated citizens ruled by the wisdom of philosopher kings and queens. Hobbes, on the other hand, asserts in *Leviathan* that government serves to prevent humankind’s return to its violent state of nature. So, what does Martí propose is the aim of government, as stated in *Nuestra América*? I have already reviewed within this paper that his primary goal was the attainment of Cuba’s independence from Spain. But the independence from Spain that Martí advocates for is dynamic and multifaceted; political independence is composed of many kinds of freedom and originality, including philosophical engagements outside of Spanish influence. As I continue to analyze his most well-known work, I find that his political theory entails an idea of what citizens ought to do with such freedom.

One significant distinction between Martí and many other political theorists is in his perception of nature, or *la constitución propia del país*, which he occasionally uses. Far from what Anglo liberals have believed, Martí seems to insist that humankind is still a component of nature rather than something that has been removed from it by a social contract. Whereas Western thinkers like Hobbes and Rousseau structure their philosophic accounts around humankind’s hypothetical moment of departure from an imagined state of nature, Martí argues that humankind never left nature. His reverence for nature goes so far as to claim that the most fitting form of government for a given polity possesses a spiritual quality that must be intuited by citizens. Martí hypothesizes in the same piece, it seems that intuition is one’s ability to exist in harmony with nature. He further explains the relationship between government and nature by asserting that one who governs must “know the true elements of the country, derive the form of government from them, and govern along with them. *Governor*, in a new country, means *Creator*” (p. 290). Implicit in his claims about the sovereignty of nature is a compelling comment on democracy that we may better understand through further exegesis of his works.

Martí continues by offering a critique of the limits of human rationalism, claiming that knowledge is not inherently a form of political capital:

The European university must yield to the American university. The history of the Americas from the Incas to the present must be taught in its smallest detail, even if the Greek archons go untaught. Our own Greece is preferable to the Greece that is not ours; we need it more (p. 291).

This passage critiques both ancient Greek thought and the European Enlightenment by insinuating that not all knowledge is equally valuable everywhere. In other words, the most “knowledgeable” citizens are not necessarily the ones who ought to govern if their knowledge is not relevant to that particular country. This refutes Kant’s hypothesis that

one form of government, a federation of republics, would lead to a more peaceful world order. Even the form of democracy itself may not remain consistent across country borders, according to Martí. His focus, after all, is on the spirit or practice of government rather than its form or bureaucratic manifestation.

The manner in which Martí (2002) describes the US's struggle for independence from Great Britain also indicates Transcendentalist influence: "The problem of independence was not the change in form, but the change in spirit" (p. 292). This sentiment stands against positivism by proposing that politics and government ought not to be entirely concerned with efficiencies and bureaucratic structures, but rather with more fundamental ideas. Martí can indeed be understood as a contemporary of the Transcendentalist movement upon careful consideration of his regard for the faculty of human intuition. Like Emerson, he does not maintain that reason alone can be used to understand the mysteries of the universe, but rather that humans must also use "vision" (Goodman, 2015). The source of reason is complementary to the fount of intuition, and each must be balanced to achieve a full understanding of nature and, indeed, government.

Racial tolerance is yet another common thread between the Transcendentalists' work and that of Martí. He may be regarded as a progressive social activist, or perhaps as a prototypical multiculturalist; he identifies spiritual unity among humankind across racial divisions without collapsing those divisions into a liberal individualist position. Studying his views on racial tolerance helps us to understand more clearly why his sphere of influence today extends beyond Cuba's borders:

It is now understood that a country's form of government must adapt to its natural elements, that absolute ideas, in order not to collapse over an error of form, must be expressed in relative terms; that liberty, in order to be viable, must be sincere and full, that if the republic does not open its arms to all and include all in its progress, it dies (Martí et al., 2002, 294).

Special attention to "absolute ideas...expressed in relative terms" is necessary, as it constitutes Martí's belief in the transcendental quality of democracy and political practice. In particular, Martí asserts a dichotomy between the ideas that govern a polity and the form of governance itself. It seems that, according to Martí, absolute ideas like democracy are incapable of flourishing in the hands of humankind. Therefore, the form of government must be dynamic and open to evolution in order to protect foundational ideals.

Interestingly, his progressive attitude toward racial minorities extends beyond the underprivileged to include even the U.S. Such compassion is the counterbalance he offers to his occasionally nationalist rhetoric in support of an independent Cuba. In some aspects, Martí (2002) apparently strives to articulate an American spirit that includes all peoples of the Western Hemisphere when he claims:

We must not, out of a villager's antipathy, impute some lethal congenital wickedness to the [U.S.] simply because it does not speak our language or share our view of what home life should be...but neither should we seek to conceal the obvious facts of the problem..." (p. 296).

To reaffirm his conviction that all people are created equal, Martí acknowledges that the U.S. must not be regarded as inherently harmful or evil. Indeed, he argues that all Americans ought to be closer to one another because of their shared *alma continental*, or “continental soul.”

Further engagements by Martí

In *Mi Raza*, Martí elaborates on his support for other liberal notions posited by the Transcendentalists. “Peace demands the shared rights of nature; differing rights go against nature and are the enemies of peace” (319). His mention of “rights” and their origin in nature marks a strong belief in liberal philosophy that serves as the backbone of his later works. More specifically, it appears that Martí relies on liberalism to constitute a public space through which Cubans can create a nation-state. Liberalism in Martí’s political philosophy precedes the creation of a new Cuba, as all civic participation must rest on the bedrock of equality for a proper democracy to function. In other words, Martí does not contend that a republic makes its citizens equal, but rather that citizens are naturally equal to one another.

One final example of the influences of liberalism on the thought of Martí is necessary. In *The Truth About the United States*, he comprehensively codifies his critiques of the U.S. Some of Martí’s political opponents regarded annexation by the U.S. as an attractive alternative to Spanish imperialism. Seeing this as the transfer of sovereignty from one imperial power to another, Martí (2002) discourages envious eyes from gazing too longingly toward the U.S.:

But it is a barren and irrational aspiration, the cowardly aspiration of secondary and inadequate people, to seek to achieve the stability of a foreign nation by paths that differ from those that led the envied nation to security and order by its own efforts and by the adaptation of human liberty to the forms required by the particular makeup of the country (p. 331).

Herein, Martí decidedly distinguishes himself as a liberal democrat by claiming that governments must be founded by the people for whom the government is intended, and that the security of human liberty primarily determines the stability of a country. Democracy, for Martí, seems to be the only mechanism through which polities in the Western Hemisphere may author their own identity apart from Western influences. His ideas about democracy are central to his lifelong mission to attain Cuba’s independence from Spain.

Conclusion

Democracy, like government more broadly, reflects the human condition. That is to say, democracy is necessitated by the human condition. In claiming that the practice of democracy is more politically significant than the form it adopts, Martí poignantly defends the exercise of intuition in public spaces. For me, his argument for a balance between intuition and reason marks a refreshing philosophical departure from hyper-rationalist and hyper-individualist approaches derived from the European Enlightenment. Martí’s reverence toward nature as the origin of intuition is a celebration of the Western Hemisphere’s promise and potential; he challenges Kant’s political philosophy in important ways, namely by critiquing the latter’s static belief in

the efficiency or fairness allegedly inherent to a form of democracy. Instead, there is some spiritual aspect of the land itself which we must intuit and transcend; the practice of politics in public spaces depends primarily on the place in which both the physical space and the citizens exist. Martí's political theory, influenced by Transcendentalism, is a defense of our anthropologically diverse and sometimes inexplicable global community. Ultimately, his philosophy rests on liberal ideas of equality that precede the existence of a nation-state. To our conception of individual rights, Martí adds that nature itself plays a politically active role in democracy. He challenges us to wonder if humans possess rights, not because of a state of nature, but because *we live in* a state of nature.

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