



JOSE MARTI AND THE EMIGRE COLONY IN KEY WEST

Leadership and State Formation



C. Neale Ronning



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1 Introduction

"Modern democracies have to answer the problem of leadership in the mass state if they want to survive the challenge of dictatorship." Thus wrote Sigmund Neumann (1965: 45) in the midst of the turbulent 1960s. Since the time of that writing, many democracies have come and gone. Others, in the name of their struggle against dictatorship, have found it expedient to adopt many of the very measures that we usually associate with dictatorship--surveillance of citizens, covert actions, misinformation campaigns, censorship, and coercion. The problem is very much with us today.

José Martí was deeply concerned about the problem of leadership and democracy nearly a century before Neumann and others expressed their concern in the 1960s. Not only was he aware of it as a theoretical problem, he was obsessed with resolving it in political practice. With him, the question of leadership was inseparable from the goal of Cuban independence. Almost all of his life, certainly all of his adult life, was passionately dedicated to the task of delivering Cuba from Spanish domination. But he demanded more than independence.

There were many other Cubans who were equally dedicated and even sacrificed their lives for the goal of independence. What set Martí apart from so many of his contemporaries, however, was an equally passionate dedication to another ideal. That ideal might best be stated as the building of a democratic, just, and stable republic, a true republic, not merely the constitutional forms masking a real dictatorship. He had analyzed and actually experienced too many of these in Spanish America. They were frequently referred to as "the corrupt republics."

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Martí was also convinced that if a democratic republic was the goal, the process of state formation could not wait until independence was achieved. The process had to begin immediately, in conjunction with the independence struggle itself. Here indeed was where he parted company with most of the veteran leaders. They would have turned the task of liberation over to a band of military heroes, leaving the process of state formation for some supposedly more propitious time after the victory over Spanish domination. But Martí envisaged quite a different process. The achievement of meaningful independence had to be a political and social process as well as a military one. Thus, a special kind of leadership would be the key element, not just a leadership that could recruit and inspire loyal followers for the coming military campaigns, but one that could instruct in the elements of democratic state formation. This had to take place while the "battle" was in progress.

How can we explain the emergence of Martí as the authoritative leader of the Cuban Revolution? He was young, chronically ill, nervous, small of stature, intellectual, and, it has been said, hopelessly romantic. These are not the qualities usually associated with the charismatic leader of a war for independence. They are hardly the qualities that we might expect to have appealed to the veteran leaders of the earlier wars for independence.

But Martí was clearly a charismatic leader. "Charismatic leadership is a very special subtype of leadership with unusual qualities not found in leadership in general" (Willner 1984: 5). What were the special qualities exhibited by Martí? How were they manifested? In what context were they shaped and with what results? These are some of the questions this study will attempt to answer.

Dankwart Rustow (1970: 23) has observed that "successful leadership . . . rests on a latent congruence between the psychic needs of the leader and the social needs of his followers." That is undoubtedly true, but the concept of "psychic needs" leaves a lot of room for definition. For example, Peter Berger (Berger and Nuehaus 1970: 14), also writing in the turbulent 1960s, asserts that "it is possible to be moved to political commitment--not because one needs it psychologically but because one chooses to involve oneself in the plight of one's fellow men." The implication there is that "to involve oneself in the plight of one's

fellow men" is not a psychic need ("because one needs it psychologically") but something of a different category. Rustow, on the other hand, would seemingly include all the categories mentioned by Berger within his concept of psychic need.

In the case of Martí, his beliefs, values, ideals and goals--and especially the tenacity with which he held them--were things that endeared him to his followers and were an inseparable part of his leadership qualities. "How to achieve a functional accommodation of truth, self interest, and reason was the central question posed by Martí. . . . His works are replete with ideas on the purpose of the state and its relations to society" (Ripoll 1984: 3). His beliefs, values, ideals and goals--and the possibility, indeed the practicality of implementing them--are the key to an insight into what seems to have been the driving force behind his tireless efforts. He was obsessed with putting his ideals into practice, and he was fully convinced that they would prevail. Whether one chooses to think of this as a "psychic need" or a wish "to involve oneself in the plight of one's fellow men" seems unimportant. Be that as it may, our main interest here is in the style of successful leadership that resulted from a deep and special kind of commitment rather than the sources of that commitment.

The other side of Rustow's equation--the social needs of the leader's followers--will also concern us. Thus the immediate and principle focus of this study in leadership and state formation is Martí's relationship with the large, bustling, thriving and sometimes radical émigré colony at Key West, Florida. That particular focus was chosen for a number of reasons.

The Cuban émigré colony at Key West played a central, perhaps the central role in the emergence of Martí as its leader and as the authoritative leader of the Cuban independence movement from 1891 until his death in 1895. It did so partly because of its size (probably more than one-third of all Cuban émigrés in approximately a dozen émigré colonies in the United States), its socioeconomic composition, its strategic location, and its widely acknowledged reputation as the leading repository of revolutionary activity and leadership when Martí made his successful bid for leadership.

Key West also had a special personal significance for Martí. The Cuban community of Key West was living proof to him that Cubans had the qualities needed to build a new society and a new

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state. Key West was already a microcosm of a new and free Cuba that had been transplanted to the tiny island. He never tired of using it as an example to lift the spirits of his co-revolutionaries everywhere. It was a laboratory and a model for what was fundamental to Martí's concept of state formation. "The noble Key . . . the exemplary Key . . . the beauty of the Key . . . the generous Key" were only a few of the expressions he used to convey his deep feelings for the spirit of the place and its people.

Finally, there are advantages in focusing on a single community. Cubans were a very community-oriented people, and Martí's leadership reflected that characteristic. It was directed toward and inspired by the life of the communities with which he worked. He saw all Cubans as a single community, but within the larger "family" there were very distinct communities, communities that had an identity and special inspirational value of their own. Key West was outstanding among them.

Martí's style of leadership was, of course, conditioned by his own experiences and his conscious preparation for the task. Thus we begin with a chapter called "The Odyssey of Martí." Here I trace very briefly the major events in his life prior to the first of his several visits to Key West, on Christmas Day, 1891. Then, since it has been suggested that there was some connection "between the psychic needs of the leader and the social needs of his followers," we will look at the bustling Cuban community of Key West at about the time of Martí's arrival. We will need to know something about how and when that unique community developed, its socioeconomic composition and, to use Rustow's expression, "its social needs."

Over a period of about three years, Martí made several historic visits to Key West. There he campaigned, organized, and otherwise promoted the work of revolution in Cuba. He made numerous public appearances, enjoyed personal contacts, and displayed his persuasive skills in discussions with veteran leaders, tobacco workers, and numerous patriotic associations on the island. From New York, and even en route among the far-flung émigré colonies, he carried on a voluminous correspondence with dozens of Key West residents in all social categories--tobacco workers, journalists, military leaders, factory owners, and other entrepreneurs. A prolific journalism, via his own newspaper Patria (established in March 1892) provided another form of

communication with this and all other émigré colonies. From the record of these highly personal forms of communication there emerges a style of leadership that is distinctly that of Martí. The major part of this study will analyze these sources, particularly as they relate to specific events and challenges in Martí's short career as leader.

A concluding chapter attempts to weave together and analyze more systematically the various techniques, skills, and qualities displayed by Martí as well as the response of this important Cuban community to his efforts. The product and the final chapter itself is called "A Style of Leadership."

A final observation needs to be made at this point in order to alert the reader to unexpected "signposts" in Martí's style of leadership as we move among the events and individuals with whom he interacted. Professor Rustow (1970: 1) tells us that most of the leaders in his study on leadership were innovators. That certainly was the case with Martí, even though the qualities of successful leaders and leadership had fascinated him throughout most of his life. He observed and drew conclusions, but he was hardly one to imitate.

The principle sources of data may be divided into three categories: First, there are the memoirs or personal histories of a number of Martí's contemporaries. These were people who knew him, worked with him, or otherwise observed him in action. They were, of course, very familiar with the community: often it was their community of which Martí openly sought to make himself the leader. They include accounts by some of the veteran leaders who lived in Key West at one time or another. In a few cases the accounts were written by an immediate family member of a veteran leader, apparently relying on oral history as well as documentary sources. Others, such as Enrique Trujillo, editor of New York's El Porvenir, were well informed about people and events in Key West through their journalistic or other participation in the independence movement.

Second, Martí's own writing, a voluminous correspondence and journalistic activity, is available in several published editions of his complete works (the most recent comprising 28 volumes) and in later supplementary publications of more recently available documents and letters. Such material is fundamental in understanding the personal element in his style of leadership.

Finally, the two categories mentioned above are, of course,

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supplemented by several biographies of Martí, histories of Cuba, and monographs on the Cuban wars for independence. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

2 The Odyssey of Martí

It was afternoon--I remember it well--when the steamship, beautifully decorated, out of that respect which foreigners have, which sometimes tells more about the future than about respect itself, moved serenely over the blue sea, toward a pier filled to overflowing. The air was golden, and the sun's rays sparkled as if in combat with one another. Could that island, built and beautified by Cubans, belong to others? . . . They opened their arms to the new arrival.

Thus José Martí (1963, 4: 298-99) recorded some of his sensations upon approaching and landing at Key West in the late afternoon of Christmas Day, 1891. The reader who detects a providential note in those words of "the Apostle, the Evangelist, the Master, the Martyr," as he was variously referred to by his contemporaries, might keep this in mind as we follow Martí in Key West. It was undoubtedly accidental, but interesting to note nevertheless, that his first visit coincided precisely with the twelve days of Christmas--December 25 to January 6. That visit would be only the first of several.

The arrival in Key West, preceded by a visit to Tampa a month earlier, marked a crucial turning point in the "odyssey of Martí." For him, Tampa was the cry of the eagle; Key West was the burst of sunshine. He was, of course, not referring to his own career but to the announcement and rebirth of the new and final phase of the Cuban independence movement. The two, however, were inseparable in his own mind and in the mind of his loyal followers.

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Our real interest is in what followed upon that "providential" arrival in Key West on December 25, 1891. But we need to place all of this in perspective, and so we must go back, even so briefly, to 1853 and identify some of the important events and places in the life of Martí as he moved about and prepared himself, sometimes consciously, for the task of leadership.

José Julián Martí y Pérez was born in Havana on January 28, 1853. His parents were of modest background; his father was a minor official in the Spanish military and his mother an emigrant from the Canary Islands. Fortunately, Martí's talents were recognized by one of Cuba's outstanding poets and educators, Rafael María de Mendive. He took the boy into his school and into his home, where he soon met and impressed members of Havana's intellectual and artistic circles. Here he met Fermín Valdés Domínguez, a fellow student from an affluent family. He remained Martí's closest friend throughout his life.

Martí was 15 years old when the Ten Years War (1868-78) broke out. Prior to this there had been sporadic uprisings, the most important being the Narciso López expeditions of 1848 and 1850. In 1868, while there was a revolution in Spain itself, a group of Cuban patriots met on a plantation in eastern Cuba and drafted the Grito de Yara, the independence proclamation. A republic was set up, usually referred to as the Republic in Arms, and a prominent landowner named Carlos Manuel de Céspedes became Provisional President. There was always friction within the movement, and in 1873 Céspedes was deposed from leadership, only to be killed in an ambush by Spanish soldiers. Poorly armed Cuban rebels carried on the struggle against Spanish troops, with the cost of some 200,000 lives and millions of dollars in property. In 1878 the Treaty of Zanzón brought the war to a close with promises of reforms and local autonomy from the Spanish government.

Not long after the Ten Years War broke out, Martí became swept up in the patriotic fervor. In 1870 he was arrested, convicted of disloyal activities, and sentenced to six years at hard labor. After six months, enough to permanently destroy his health, he was pardoned through the intercession of influential friends. In January 1871 he was deported to Spain. There Martí took up his university studies (again with the help of friends), and

by October 1874 he had passed his examinations for degrees in law and philosophy at the University of Zaragoza.

For the next six years, after a brief visit to Paris (1874), Martí earned his living as a teacher and writer in Mexico, Guatemala, and Venezuela. In between these short stays he returned clandestinely to Cuba in January 1877, using his second given name and his maternal family name--Julián Pérez. He remarked to a friend that even in deception some honesty should be practiced. He stayed for only two months. That same year he was married to Carmen Zaya Bazán who was from a wealthy Cuban family then living in Mexico.

After the treaty ending the Ten Years War (1878) he returned openly to Cuba where his son was born. He practiced law briefly, but the more important fact was that, now an adult, he made many contacts which would be useful to him later. Chief among these contacts was the young mulatto lawyer and journalist Juan Gualberto Gómez. He would later become Martí's main agent on the island when it was organized under the Cuban Revolutionary Party.

Martí was soon deported again for revolutionary activity. He went to Spain and after brief stops in Paris and New York, Venezuela became his residence and place of work for about six months. His stay there was cut short because he fell into trouble with Venezuela's dictator Guzmán Blanco (he had run into the same problem in Guatemala and Mexico), and on July 29, 1881 he sailed for New York. That "cup of poison," as he called it (Martí 1965, 20: 90-91), became his "permanent" home in exile until he returned to Cuba in 1895. He spent far more of his adult life in New York than anywhere else.

In New York he earned his living as a teacher, translator, and writer. As a journalist he was the New York correspondent for some of Latin America's leading newspapers, including La Nación of Buenos Aires. His writings became known and praised throughout Latin America and in Europe. He was something of a precursor of the great Uruguayan journalist-scholar José Enrique Rodó in his defense of Latin culture and civilization, confronted by doctrines of Anglo-American racial superiority so popular in the United States in the last half of the nineteenth century. He was an able critic of United States imperialism and of the dehumanizing aspects of capitalism in the United States.

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In addition to all of this, he served in consular and diplomatic posts for the governments of Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay. But his work for Cuban independence soon brought protest from the Spanish government, and rather than embarrass his friends, he resigned (by this time he also needed more time for his revolutionary activities).

Whatever his occupation, the struggle for Cuban independence was always on his mind, and except for a short time after 1884, it was always something in which he took an active part. Veterans of the Ten Years War soon recognized the young activist and propagandist as one who could contribute to their cause. He had written the manifesto or proclamation for an 1880 uprising--the Guerra Chiquita (little war) led by Calixto García--and helped drum up enthusiasm for the same cause.

Martí's effective use of words became legendary with listeners and readers alike. He has been referred to as "the Victor Hugo of Cuban prose" (Mora y Varona 1952: 234). Rubén Darío (1983: 72) the great Nicaraguan poet, observed that "I have never found, even in a Castelar [a famous Spanish orator-educator], such an admirable conversationalist. He was pleasant and informal, gifted with a prodigious memory. . . . I spent unforgettable moments with him." His effect upon an audience was already widely known in New York. It was precisely this last quality that was a source of great interest but also a cause for suspicion among veteran leaders. They required his skills as much as they mistrusted them.

The real problem was that Martí was more than a skilled orator. He had his own ideas and principles, mixed with a very strong will, all of which soon brought him into open conflict with two principal veteran leaders--General Máximo Gómez and General Antonio Maceo. This conflict had such large repercussions in Key West and for the future of the whole independence movement that it must be summarized here.

In 1884, General Gómez, a Dominican who had emerged as the military leader of the Cuban independence movement, was planning another uprising. His associate was General Maceo, who was also one of the principal leaders of the Ten Years War. Martí had already begun to openly question the efforts by heroic leaders of a small expeditionary force who expected, without advanced planning and without justification, that the island would rally to arms. In a letter to Gómez on July 20, 1882, Martí

(1963, 1: 1968, 170) briefly stated his position: "I have rejected all agitation for more of those pernicious cliques of the past wars." In the same letter he suggested the formation of a revolutionary party, although it is not quite clear what he meant by that term. These were ideas that were in the process of development and it would be difficult to say at what stage they were in at this point.

Martí also believed that the independence movement, in order to enlist broad support, would have to declare itself for something more than simply the separation from Spain. On the same day that he wrote to General Gómez, he wrote to General Maceo stating some of the principles involved. As he saw it, "the Cuban problem needs, rather than a political solution, a social solution, and . . . the latter cannot be achieved except through mutual love and forgiveness between the races." The objective would have to be "a country in which . . . all the diverse elements will begin, from its founding, to enjoy real rights in the true conditions of a long and peaceful life" (Martí 1963, 1: 172-73). These, like his ideas on organization, were in the process of development.

We return to the plans underway for the Gómez-Maceo expedition in 1884. Late in that year Gómez and Maceo arrived in New York to talk with Martí, whose collaboration had been sought to organize support from the New York émigré colony. They sensed what Calixto García had understood four years earlier--that Martí was the master of agitation and propaganda (Ibarra 1981: 48).

But Gómez envisaged a very subordinate role for the young orator, a role that was more in keeping with Gómez's ideas concerning civil-military relations in time of war. Those ideas in turn grew out of experience in the Ten Years War (the problem of civilian "interference" and "obstruction") and we must again digress briefly in order to put those ideas in perspective.

Both Gómez and Maceo had opposed the political settlement ending the Ten Years War and blamed it on weak civilian politicians of the Republic in Arms (the government set up during the war). Over the years, both had been quite frank about their views on civil-military relations. Gómez (1968: 192) spoke of the need for a "revolutionary dictatorship," without the "effeminate" interference of civilian politicians: "Can one by chance cite a revolution in the world that does not have its

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dictatorship?" he asked. And Maceo (1950, 1: 245) was equally clear on this point: "One head will direct politics and war, and we will be the laws and defenders of order."

As noted, both leaders, pragmatists that they were, sought Martí's collaboration for plans that were already under way. As part of these plans, Maceo was to go to Mexico on a very sensitive mission and Martí was to accompany him. Martí showed enthusiasm for the undertaking and in conversation in Gómez's New York hotel room, he expressed some of his own ideas and made some suggestions which annoyed the old leader (Márquez 1965: 219-20). Gómez quickly and crisply interrupted him: "Look Martí, limit yourself to what the instructions tell you, and as for the rest, Maceo will do all that needs to be done" (Lizaso 1974: 188; Ripoll 1971b: 87). Martí left the room courteously, some have assured us, and that marked the beginning of a long break between the old leaders and the emerging new leader (Turton 1986: 13; Hernández 1968: 142).

Two days after these conversations, Martí wrote to Gómez. In a long letter of October 20, 1884 he bluntly stated his concerns and his disagreement with the general's concept of the independence movement.

A people is not founded, General, in the same way that one commands a military camp. . . . What are we, General? The modest and heroic servants of an idea that warms our hearts, the faithful friends of a people who have fallen on bad times, or [are we] the brave and fortunate military leaders who, with whip in hand and spurs on the heels of their boots, are preparing to lead a people into war, only to lord it over them in the aftermath? . . . No, no, for God's sake: do you set out to suffocate thought even before finding yourself leading an enthusiastic and grateful people? (Martí 1963, 1: 177-79).

With that, Martí effectively withdrew from further participation in the plans that were under way. Gómez did not reply to the letter, considering it insulting (Ibarra 1981: 63). But he wrote to Juan Arnao (who we will meet later, in Key West) asking him to serve as an intermediary for a reconciliation (he also contacted others). These efforts were of no avail and Gómez