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**Doing Business with the Colonizer:
Martí and the 1889 Paris World Exhibition**

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José Martí is widely known as a social critic and freedom fighter who sacrificed his life for the independence of Cuba. The postcolonial critic Roberto Fernández Retamar compares him to Caliban fighting Prospero in an uneven power struggle against a foreign invader (8), and Ivan Schulman likens Martí's social involvement to Hegel's idea of the *master-slave* conflict (9). These views, however, only portray one facet of the Cuban Apostle's mind. While Martí denounced imperialism and the exploitation of workers in the U.S. toward the end of the nineteenth century, he also possessed a savvy sense of salesmanship in dealing with European colonizing countries when this could bring about economic benefits for Latin America. This pragmatic approach to bridging the economic and technological gap between Europe and Latin America defines Martí as a political thinker who transcends ideological opposites.

My study will be based on José Martí's 1889 essay on the Paris World Exhibition taking place in the same year. This article contains a strong statement for a republic as opposed to monarchy and an open acknowledgement of the benefits of free trade and international business. Despite his denunciation of colonialism and imperialism, Martí's coverage of the Paris World Exhibition demonstrates his eagerness to start a relationship of trade and commerce between Latin America and Europe for the benefit of both thereby overcoming the old antagonism of colonizer and colonized.

The demands of the U.S. and Europe for Latin American raw products rose sharply throughout the second half of the 19th century. The U.S. emerged as the principal industrialized nation of the world and as the foremost consumer of Latin American exports. As the industrial centers bought more agricultural and mineral products from Latin America, the regions' plantation owners and miners produced larger amounts of grain, coffee, sugar, cotton, cacao, bananas, livestock, copper, silver, tin, lead, zinc, and nitrates for export. The natural products—such as palm oils, nuts, woods, rubber, and medical plants—also found a ready market abroad (Burns 133).

Mounting foreign investment also characterized the Latin American economy in the second half of the 19th century. Europe generously sent capital, technology, and technicians to Latin America to assure the increased agricultural and mineral productions that its factories and urban populations required (Burns 137).

It was in this atmosphere of increasing economic interest between Latin America and the industrialized nations that José Martí conceived in 1889 his essay on the Exposition of Paris joining the voices calling for transatlantic trade. As if to emphasize the emergence of a new postcolonial era with a free and interconnected world, he begins this article with an allusion to absolutism—the era of absolute monarchic power: “Los pueblos todos del mundo se han juntado este verano de 1889 en París. Hasta hace cien años, los hombres vivían como esclavos de los reyes, que nos los dejaban pensar, y les quitaban mucho de lo que ganaban en sus oficios” (XVIII, 406)¹. Martí refers to the political situation in France before the revolution in 1789—an event that appears to him “como si se acabase un mundo, y empezara otro” (XVIII, 406). With the end of monarchy a new era of economic and political freedom has started, and France is the best example even though Martí alludes to Napoleon’s reign as a form of tyranny in the same article.

Martí did not see the exhibition of Paris in person. As with most of his articles on European or U.S. topics, he relied on the vast array of newspapers and magazines available in New York as sources for his description of the European trade fair. Martí’s rendering of the exhibition of Paris amounts to a eulogy of technological progress and the diversity and creativity of human life. He presents people from all over the world who have peacefully united in Paris for a limited time to show off their economic potential for trade and commerce. His account of the exhibition does not reveal criticism of bourgeois culture or capitalism. Instead, it celebrates the products of hard work in the form of wealth, opulence and art. Martí is impressed that “por veintidós puertas se puede entrar a la Exposición.” He describes “aquellos trabajos exquisitos que hacían con plata para las iglesias y las mesas de los príncipes los joyeros del tiempo de capa y espadón, cuando los platos de comer eran de oro, y las copas de beber eran como los cálices.” Martí is equally amazed by the garden and by the abundance of roses when he exclaims that “de rosas nada más, hay cuatro mil quinientas diferentes: hay una rosa casi azul (XVIII, 410).

Not only is Martí impressed with the beauty, opulence and diversity of the show, he is also astonished by the technological advances that can be observed at the Exposition of Paris. He leads the reader to the *Palacio de las Industrias*, makes him close his eyes and open them again after arriving at a balcony from where he can look down on a huge hall filled with machinery:

¹ Martí’s quotes have been taken from *Obras Completas*. Habana: Editorial Nacional de Cuba, 1963-73. They are henceforth indicated by the Roman numerical for the volume and the Arabic number for the page.

Por un corredor que hace pensar en cosas grandes, se va a la escalera que lleva al balcón del monumento: se alzan los ojos: y se ve, llena de luz de sol, una sala de hierro en que podrían dormir treinta mil hombres. ¡Y toda está cubierta de máquinas, que dan vueltas, que aplastan, que silban, que echan luz, que atraviesan el aire calladas, que corren temblando debajo de la tierra! ... ¡Pues da ganas de llorar, el ver las máquinas desde el balcón! Rugen, susurran, es como la mar. (XVIII, 426)

Martí describes the machines as animated objects, which are powerful and sound like human beings. It is as if Martí sees in them friends of human beings, who can ultimately help them alleviate their work and their pain. He does not describe the hall as an unfriendly environment for humans. It is “filled with sunlight,” and watching the machines makes the spectator cry of joy. Martí often uses the concepts of light and transparency when he alludes to human progress.

The critic Jorge Camacho refers to Martí’s positive portrayal of machinery at the Exhibition of Paris claiming that the Cuban “once again offered a defense of the machine, imbuing science with a touch of the supernatural and grandiose” (335). But Camacho also points to instances where Martí voices criticism concerning technological advances. He states that Martí’s attitude toward modernity was anti-modern when it dealt with its alienating, dehumanizing, and racist dimensions, but he was in favor of it when modernity promised practical advances in terms of living conditions and the satisfaction of human needs (335).

Martí’s description of the machines at the Exhibition of Paris expresses optimism in a better future and it focuses on the positive potential of machinery. Nevertheless, he is aware of the plight of the working proletariat in Europe and North America, of the laborer who is laid off because the machine replaces his work, and of the inhumane working conditions in factories. He criticizes these ills in his writings extensively, most prominently in his essay on the Chicago anarchists. But Martí would not be a “planetary” figure, as Spivak points out (92), if he did not believe in the improvement of the human mind and in progress for the good of man.

Martí devotes most of the space in his essay on the Exposition of Paris to the depiction of the pavilions of various Latin American countries at the show of 1889. This is indicative of his ground plan to connect the Latin American markets with those of Europe and the world. Martí embraces the free intermingling of cultures, the exchange of ideas, and ultimately international business. The fair in Paris represents for Martí a unique opportunity of economic advertising, marketing, and introducing Latin America to the world markets with its big players Europe and the U.S. In Paris, Latin American countries can present the cultural and economic potential of their people and at the same time set the basis for future trade relations with other countries. Thus, when Martí praises the exhibits of the different Latin American pavilions for their art and craft, he not only expresses his pride in his roots and culture, he also insinuates hope that the Western industries will notice the still untapped economic wealth of Latin America and begin a business relationship for the benefit of all.

Martí mentions the pavilions of Guatemala, Nicaragua, Uruguay, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Mexico and Venezuela. When depicting their exhibits and commenting on the history of Latin America, he ignores the achievements of the colonizer and instead focuses on the Native Americans, on their culture, life, and religion. The Mexican pavilion draws most of his attention. Martí highlights Native American religion and mythology, and the role of the indigenous freedom fighters against the Spanish conquerors. Hinting at the intricacies of their cosmos, Martí suggests a highly developed culture that honored the earth and the sun, whereas the Spanish brought death and destruction. He underscores the role of the Indians Cacama, Cuitláhuac, and Cuauhtémoc, and calls them “brave” because they fought for the independence of their people (XVIII, 417-418).

Neither in his description of the Mexican pavilion nor in those of the other Latin American countries does Martí refer to the culture of the colonizer. It is as if he wants to express that Latin American history came to an end with the conquest of that continent and now needs to be continued with a delay of several hundred years. For him, the Spanish do not count in Latin American history. It is only the rich and elaborate indigenous culture that is relevant for the Americas. Thus, Martí praises “las cortinas hermosas, las vidrieras de caoba en que están las filigranas de plata, los tejidos de fibras, las esencias de olor, los platos de esmalte y las jarras de barniz, los ópalos, los vinos, los arneses, los azúcares; todo tiene por adorno letras y figuras indias” (XVIII, 418).

Martí’s description of the diversity and intricacy of Native American artistic skills suggests an Indian culture with a strong social base of the crafts. The variety and quality of the objects insinuate a tradition of commerce and trade, i.e. a pre-capitalist society. The predominance that Martí gives the Indian culture in his descriptions of the pavilions in Paris suggests that he expects the indigenous people to play a prominent role in postcolonial America. This implies respect for their private industries, their capacities in commerce, their customs and their religions.

Martí pays particular attention to the Native Americans’ rural life when he exclaims that “vivos parecen, con sus trajes de cuero de flecos y galones, y sus sombreros anchos con trenzado de plata y oro, y su zarape al hombro, de seda de color, vivos como si fueran a montar a caballo, los maniqués del estanciero rico, del joven elegante que cuida de su hacienda, y sabe ‘voltear’ un toro” (XVIII, 418). Martí’s picture of the idyllic life in the country intimates the importance of owning private property as the precondition for pride in one’s culture, which in turn leads to a thriving economy. He infers that holding land and being affluent are integral parts of Indian customs and essential for social stability and economic growth.

Without doubt, Martí welcomes the advent of modernity and technological progress with their potential for improving human life, and it is significant that Martí chooses the surroundings of a world fair for promoting Latin American culture. This show incidentally takes place in Paris, the heart of European bourgeois culture. It only demonstrates Martí’s pragmatic approach to solving Latin American problems such as

poverty or technological backwardness through linking up with the technologically more advanced European nations. He extols machines that benefit especially Latin American working conditions: “Una máquina echa aire en el pozo de una mina para que no se ahoguen los mineros. Otra aplasta la caña, y echa un chorro de miel” (XVIII, 426). In Martí’s mind, Latin America can benefit from European or North American know-how.

Martí seeks the symbiosis of the former colonizer and the colonized even though he is aware that European countries such as France are still exploiting their colonies. Thus, he mentions the *Palacio Central* at the exposition as the building that contains “todas las tierras que tiene Francia en Asia” (XVIII, 428). While acknowledging France’s colonialism, Martí is too realistic to ignore the technological edge of the colonizing nations and not to use it for the benefit of Latin America.

The illustrations of the pavilions that are included in his essay on the Exposition of Paris are indicative of Martí’s pragmatic spirit. The nations of Latin America are housed in ornate neo-classical buildings that have little in common with the cultures of the countries that they exhibit. Martí’s enthusiastic depiction of both the architectural beauty of the pavilions and the exhibits they contain reflect his desire to connect Latin America with the culture and industries of Europe and the U.S.

The critic Alvaro Fernández Bravo refers to Martí’s optimistic reception of the world fair in Paris claiming that José Martí’s text about the exhibition comes from an “intensely Latin Americanist position” (120). Bravo points out the political aspect of Martí’s portrayal of the various Latin American countries as a whole entity and not as individual countries. In an account like Martí’s, Latin American representations are combined political and cultural units, and the exhibition is described as a model of universal coexistence where rich and poor, powerful and weak, respect each other. In Martí’s introduction to his essay on the exposition of Paris “the French antimonarchic republicanism prevailed” (Bravo 120). Martí’s Latin Americanist interpretation of the Paris world exhibition and the apology of republican values are related to Martí’s commitment to Cuban independence. His text intends to defend the right of every country to represent itself. Martí is concerned with the self-representation of independent states and in the egalitarian cohabitation—at a symbolic level—of all nations at this exhibition (Bravo 120-121).

Martí’s idealistic plan of equality and independence of nations reveals the Emersonian concept of self-reliance and harmony in nature. For Martí, the different cultural levels of Latin America and Europe do not represent contradictions and can be bridged by trade and mutual respect. One can argue, however, that Martí apparently fails to notice that the ulterior motive of the exposition in Paris was not to celebrate the equality and independence of nations but rather the opposite. The exposition of Paris and other trade shows of the nineteenth century were often motivated by imperialism and domination. They were presented as an inventory of the world and they were comparable to the encyclopedias of their time because they shared the all-encompassing aim of capturing the diversity and multiplicity of humanity. Like encyclopedias, the exhibitions apparently claimed to have an open ideology, but in

reality their goal was domination (Bravo 116). Martí's description of the technological edge of the European countries and the rustic character of the Latin American nations confirms the view that the trade shows merely served the purpose of accentuating the cultural gap between Europe and the rest of the world.

The exhibitions and world fairs offered opportunities for trade and capital investment. Science served as an instrument with which to advertise merchandise and market opportunities to potential investors thereby displaying progress and civilization, but also backwardness and barbarism. The exhibitions were supposed to show the "world progress" of the industrialized nations. The metropolis's behavior, however, was more "barbaric" because they used their colonies, which were unable to represent themselves, as a basis to highlight their own progress and "evolution." Thus, the depiction of barbarism of one nation served to underscore the civilized qualities of another (Bravo 118).

In view of the trade shows' imperialistic design, Martí's depiction of the Exposition of Paris must appear to be the naive account of a display of European power next to culturally and economically inferior former and present colonies. However, Martí's omission of addressing the imperialistic motive of the trade fair was less based on ignorance rather than on pragmatic considerations. He wanted Latin America to represent part of the world community and to join the European nations in their technological progress even if that meant doing business with imperial powers. In his essay on the Exposition of Paris, Martí once again revealed a keen understanding of *realpolitik* and a mind devoid of ideological confrontation.

Martí's support for modernity, entrepreneurship, and free market among the nations of the world can also be observed in his essays on various trade fairs in the U.S. and in Europe. In North America, for example, he describes the wool fair in New Orleans (1883), the railroad fair of Chicago (1883), or a fair in Boston (1883). In his 1884 essay on the fair of American products, he explores ways to sell Latin American products more efficiently on the world market. According to Martí, Latin America offers manifold riches to be traded to the industrial nations. What it lacks, however, is businesslike advertising. He admits that Latin America has no industries, and the ones that are there are small and insignificant to use and process products. But Martí points out that there is an abundance of raw material that can be turned into a source of wealth for Latin America:

Industrias no tenemos; o la tenemos tímidas y pobres, para utilizar y transformar nuestros productos; pero con productos sí contamos, no menos notables por su novedad que por su variedad, en los que la nerviosa industria europea y norteamericana puede ver fuentes nuevas de riqueza. Más oro y plata que en nuestras minas tenemos en nuestras plantas textiles, en nuestra farmacopea vegetal y en nuestras maderas tintóreas y aromáticas. Pero nadie compra a vendedor que no se anuncia, como no va a buscar la Fama al hombre de mérito que no saca de sí palabra ni obra. (VIII, 366)

Not only does Martí let out analytical knowledge of the intricacies of the American and European markets, he also lectures on marketing strategies focusing on the importance of publicizing the products. He thinks that the markets of Europe and North America

need to be tapped with what only Latin America can offer, such as textiles, new medicines, and special sorts of woods. As for examples of efficient advertising, Martí hints at the U.S. custom of conducting trade fairs where the country can offer its goods to the world. He states that “se ve, por tanto, cómo esta nación próspera, industrial, rival en fábricas de todas las grandes naciones, acreditada y admirada, no sólo no recibe con desdén, sino con ardor y prisa, la idea de ir a exhibir a otros países industriales los productos de su naturaleza” (VIII, 367). According to Martí, effective advertising only works with a global market in mind. For that purpose, it is necessary to create business connections not only locally but globally. He points out how traveling sales agents of U.S. companies scout markets on a worldwide scale to find new outlets for U.S. products and also buy foreign goods:

Envían las casas de comercio por sobre la redondez de la tierra agentes viajeros que les recaben órdenes; no bien se acredita un telar en Birmingham, una cuchillería en Manchester, una región en Borgoña, una fábrica de electroplata en los Estados Unidos, mandan hombres despiertos a los más lejanos países a que vulgaricen, recomienden y exhiban el producto nuevo. (VIII, 367)

The idea of opening new markets around the world demonstrates how Martí anticipates the dynamics of globalization in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He portrays U.S. entrepreneurship as a model for Latin America and suggests a capitalistic attitude for the young Latin American countries. Martí regards a visible presence as essential for successful commerce, which is why he opts for permanent trade shows and exhibitions, where Latin America can present its goods to European and North American industrial centers on an uninterrupted basis: “En todos los mercados, activos, en todas las ciudades comerciales y manufactureras de Europa y Norteamérica, debieran sostener los países americanos una exhibición permanente de sus productos” (VIII, 367).

Considering Martí’s suggestion of linking Latin American markets with those of colonizing nations, Retamar’s placing Martí alongside socialist thinkers such as Fidel Castro, Che Guevara or Mariátegui becomes untenable (18). Even in his essay “Nuestra América,” written two years after his 1889 article on the Paris World Exhibition and showing a considerably higher degree of antagonism against imperialistic powers than in his previous writings, Martí demonstrates a pragmatic attitude when he suggests that “injértese en nuestras repúblicas el mundo; pero el tronco ha de ser el de nuestras repúblicas” (VI, 18). His thoughts on the Paris World Exhibition confirm his eagerness to cooperate with the colonizer. They defy attempts of ideological categorization and reveal a visionary and planetary mind.

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