

José Martí: Our America

Cubans refer to José Martí (1853–1895) as the apostle of Cuban independence. He founded the Cuban Revolutionary Party in 1892 to struggle for independence from Spain. Living in exile in the United States—in the belly of the beast, as he put it—he warned Cubans in this 1891 essay not to emulate foreign solutions to their problems but to look to their own creativity. Martí was killed fighting for Cuban independence in 1895.

To govern well requires an understanding and appreciation of local realities. Anyone who would govern well in the Americas does not need to know how the Germans or the French govern themselves but rather needs to possess a basic knowledge of his own country, its resources, advantages, and problems and how to utilize them for the benefit of the nation, and needs to know local customs and institutions. The goal is to reach that happy state in which everyone can enjoy the abundance Nature has bestowed so generously on the Americas. Each must work for that enjoyment and be prepared to defend that abundance with his life. Good government arises from the conditions and needs of each nation. The very spirit infusing government must reflect local realities. Good government is nothing more and nothing less than a balance of local needs and resources.

The person who knows his own environment is far superior to anyone dependent on imported books for knowledge. Such a natural person has more to contribute to society than someone versed in artificial knowledge. The native of mixed ancestry is superior to the white person born here but attracted to foreign ideas. No struggle exists between civilization and barbarism but rather between false erudition and natural knowledge. Natural people are good; they respect and reward wisdom as long as it is not used to degrade, humiliate, or belittle them. They are ready to defend themselves and to demand respect from anyone wounding their pride or threatening their well-being. Tyrants have risen to power by conforming to these natural elements; they also have fallen by betraying them. Our republics have paid through tyranny for their inability to understand the true national reality, to derive from it the best form of government, and to govern accordingly. In a new nation, to govern is to create.

In nations inhabited by both the educated and the uneducated, the uneducated will govern because it is their nature to confront and resolve problems with their hands, while the educated dither over which formula to import, a futile means to resolve local problems. **The uneducated people are lazy and timid in matters related to intelligence and seek to be governed well,**

but if they perceive the government to be injurious to their interests they will overthrow it to govern themselves. How can our universities prepare men to govern when not one of them teaches anything either about the art of government or the local conditions? The young emerge from our universities indoctrinated with Yankee or French ideas, aspiring to govern a people they do not understand. Those without a rudimentary knowledge of political reality should be barred from a public career. Prizes should be awarded not for the best poetry but for the best essays on national reality. Journalists, professors, and academicians ought to be promoting the study of national reality. Who are we, where have we been, which direction should we go? It is essential to ask such basic questions in our search for truth. To fail to ask the right questions or to fail to answer them truthfully dooms us. We must know the problems in order to respond to them, and we must know our potentials in order to realistically frame our responses. Strong and indignant natural people resent the imposition of foreign solutions, the insidious result of sterile book learning, because they have little or nothing to do with local conditions and realities. To know those realities is to possess the potential to resolve problems. To know our countries and to govern them in accordance with that knowledge is the only way to liberate ourselves from tyranny. Europeanized education here must give way to American education. The history of the Americas, from the Incas to the present, must be taught in detail even if we forego the courses on ancient Greece. Our own Greece is much more preferable to the Greece which is not ours. It is more important and meaningful to us. Statesmen with a nationalist view must replace politicians whose heads are in Europe even though their feet remain in the Americas. Graft the world onto our nations if you will, but the trunk itself must be us. Silence the pedant who thrives on foreign inspiration.

There are no lands in which a person can take a greater pride than in our own long-suffering American republics. The Americas began to suffer, and still suffer, from the effort of trying to reconcile the discordant and hostile elements which they inherited from a despotic and greedy colonizer. Imported ideas and institutions with scant relationship to local realities have retarded the development of logical and useful governments. Our continent, disoriented for three centuries by governance that denied people the right to exercise reason, began in independence by ignoring the humble who had contributed so much in the effort to redeem it. At least in theory, reason was to reign in all things and for everyone, not just scholastic reason at the expense of the simpler reason of the majority. But the problem with our independence is that we changed political formulas without altering our colonial spirit.

The privileged made common cause with the oppressed

to terminate a system which they found opposed to their own best interests. . . . The colonies continue to survive in the guise of republics. Our America struggles to save itself from the monstrous errors of the past—its haughty capital cities, the blind triumph over the disdained masses, the excessive reliance on foreign ideas, and unjust, impolitic hatred of the native races—and relies on innate virtues and sacrifices to replace our colonial mentality with that of free peoples.

With our chest of an athlete, our hands of a gentleman, and our brain of a child, we presented quite a sight. We masqueraded in English breeches, a French vest, a Yankee jacket, and a Spanish hat. The silent Indians hovered near us but took their children into the mountains to orient them. The Afro-Americans, isolated in this continent, gave expression to thought and sorrow through song. The peasants, the real creators, viewed with indignation the haughty cities. And we the intellectuals wore our fancy caps and gowns in countries where the population dressed in headbands and sandals. Our genius will be in the ability to combine headband and cap, to amalgamate the cultures of the European, Indian, and Afro-American, and to ensure that all who fought for liberty enjoy it. Our colonial past left us with judges, generals, scholars, and bureaucrats. The idealistic young have been frustrated in efforts to bring change. The people have been unable to translate triumph into benefits. The European and Yankee books hold no answers for our problems and our future. Our problems grow. Frustrations mount. Exhausted by these problems and frustrations, by the struggles between the intellectual and the military, between reason and superstition, between the city and the countryside, and by the contentious urban politicians who abuse the natural nation, tempestuous or inert by turns, we turn now to a new compassion and understanding.

The new nations look about, acknowledging each other. They ask, "Who and what are we?" We suggest tentative answers. When a local problem arises, we are less likely to seek the answer in London or Paris. Our styles may all still originate in France but our thought is becoming more American. The new generation rolls up its sleeves, gets its hands dirty, and sweats. It is getting results. Our youth now understands that we are too prone to imitate and that our salvation lies in creativity. "Creativity" is the password of this new generation. The wine is from the plantain, and even if it is bitter it is our wine! They understand that the form a government takes in a given country must reflect the realities of that country. Fixed ideas must become relative in order for them to work. Freedom to experiment must be honest and complete. If these republics do not include all their populations and benefit all of them, then they will fail.

The new American peoples have arisen; they look about; they greet each other. A new leadership emerges which understands local realities. New leaders read and study in order to

apply their new knowledge, to adapt it to local realities, not to imitate. Economists study problems with an historical context. Orators eschew flamboyance for sober reality. Playwrights people the stages with local characters. Academicians eschew scholastic theories to discuss pressing problems. Poets eschew marble temples and Gothic cathedrals in favor of local scenes. Prose offers ideas and solutions. In those nations with large Indian populations, the presidents are learning to speak Indian languages.

The greatest need of Our America is to unite in spirit. The scorn of our strong neighbor the United States is the greatest present danger to Our America. The United States now pays greater attention to us. It is imperative that this formidable neighbor get to know us in order to dissipate its scorn. Through ignorance, it might even invade and occupy us. Greater knowledge of us will increase our neighbor's understanding and diminish that threat.

A new generation reshapes our continent. This new generation recreates Our America. It sows the seeds of a New America from the Río Grande to the Straits of Magellan. The hopes of Our America lie in the originality of the new generation.

Source: Text adapted from "Nuestra America," *El Partido Liberal* (Mexico City), January 30, 1891, p. 4, by E. Bradford Burns, ed., *Latin America: Conflict and Creation, A Historical Reader* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 110–13.

Ode to Roosevelt

The Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (1867–1916) is best known as the father of modernism, as a cosmopolitan who lived most of his life in Europe. But when Theodore Roosevelt ordered United States intervention in Panama in 1903, he wrote this poem in protest.

To Roosevelt

The voice that would reach you, Hunter, must speak
in Biblical tones, or in the poetry of Walt Whitman.
You are primitive and modern, simple and complex;
you are one part George Washington and one part Nimrod.

You are the United States,
future invader of our naive America
with its Indian blood, an America
that still prays to Christ and still speaks Spanish.

You are a strong, proud model of your race;
you are culture and able; you oppose Tolstoy.

You are an Alexander-Nebuchadnezzar,
 breaking horses and murdering tigers.
 (You are a Professor of Energy,
 as the current lunatics say.)
 You think that life is a fire,
 that progress is an irruption,
 that the future is wherever
 your bullet strikes.
 No.

The United States is grand and powerful.
 Whenever it trembles, a profound shudder
 runs down the enormous backbone of the Andes.
 If it shouts, the sound is like the roar of a lion.
 And Hugo said to Grant: "The stars are yours."

(The dawning sun of the Argentine barely shines;
 the star of Chile is rising . . .) A wealthy country,
 joining the cult of Mammon to the cult of Hercules;
 while Liberty, lighting the path
 to easy conquest, raises her torch in New York.

But our own America, which has had poets
 since the ancient times of Nezahualcōyotl;
 which preserved the footprints of the great Bacchus,
 and learned the Panic alphabet once,
 and consulted the stars; which also knew Atlantis
 (whose name comes ringing down to us in Plato)
 and has lived, since the earliest moments of its life,
 in light, in fire, in fragrance, and in love—
 the America of Moctezuma and Atahualpa,
 the aromatic America of Columbus,
 Catholic America, Spanish America,
 the America where noble Cuauhtémoc said:
 "I am not on a bed of roses"—our America,
 trembling with hurricanes, trembling with Love:
 O men with Saxon eyes and barbarous souls,
 our America lives. And dreams. And loves.
 And it is the daughter of the Sun. Be careful.
 Long live Spanish America!
 A thousand cubs of the Spanish lion are roaming free.
 Roosevelt, you must become, by God's own will,
 the deadly Rifleman and the dreadful Hunter
 before you can clutch us in your iron claws.

And though you have everything, you are lacking one thing:
 God!

Source: *Selected Poems of Rubén Darío*, Lysander Kemp, tran. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 69–70. Copyright © 1965, renewed 1993, reprinted by permission of the University of Texas Press.

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The Past Challenged

The export boom of the late nineteenth century produced profound changes in the social composition of Latin America. New export opportunities opened the doors of fortune, though not necessarily of political opportunity, to arriviste elites. The expanding middle sectors wanted a political voice to convince the state to address their needs—particularly to provide expanded education and opportunities for their children. And beneath the elites and middle class was the mass of urban and rural workers who longed for better economic conditions. The middle class at times joined with the urban working class to press similar demands, but continued to identify primarily with the elites, who they aspired to join. Where ruling elites allowed some change, there was reform. Where they resisted, there was revolution.

Here, Argentina provides a compelling counterpoint to Mexico. By the turn of the century, 60 percent of the Buenos Aires population consisted of manual workers, many of them foreign-born. While the United States is often viewed as the nation of immigrants, 30 percent of Argentina's population was foreign-born, compared to 13 percent in the United States. The largely Italian and Spanish immigrants brought with them ideas about socialism, anarchism, and anarcho-syndicalism. In 1895, the Socialist Party was formed,