

JOSÉ MARTÍ, HENRY GEORGE, AND KARL MARX:

THE VALIDITY OF THEIR IDEAS ON LAND OWNERSHIP AND EXPLOITATION

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"Only Darwin in the natural sciences has left in our times a legacy comparable to that of George's in social science." (Martí, 1975, p.146)

This statement made by José Martí in June 1887 defines the theoretical basis of his developing thinking on property in the means of production — that critical aspect of all political proposals. At the same time, it differs from what Engels said four years before, in 1883, during his famous speech at Marx's funeral.¹

So, the North American Henry George was the social theorist that had most impressed the national hero of Cuba.

The purpose of this analysis is to show the points of agreement that Martí, Henry George, and Karl Marx have about land ownership and exploitation, and how these men's ideas manifest themselves in the present Cuban life, taking into account that Martí and Marx are the two ideologists of the present Cuban political system.

We will first refer to Martí's judgments about George's principal work *Progress and Poverty*. He synthesized this work to its minimum expression as a "profound study of human sufferings and their causes" that "concludes that all suffering comes from the accumulation of land in private hands, and maintains that the problem of poverty in these large nations does not have any other solution but to peacefully convert, by means of a tax reform, all land, which Nature created for all men, to national property, for whose use the occupant has to pay to the community, whether they exploit it or not, the rent of the occupied land, which will go as a unique contribution to pay the legitimate expenses of the public treasury, who then will not have to aggravate the costs of living with customs taxes and still will be able, with the surplus, to take in hand and to govern by itself all the means of communication necessary for human happiness, which, for not being able to exist without the national element of land, belong by right to the nation for the benefit of its inhabitants." (Almanza, 1999, p.274)

This idea, even today socially revolutionary in many aspects, has global limitations from the Marxist point of view because it offers the solution to the social problem by nationalizing only land and the so-called public services of the time: mail, telegraph and railroad; and by charging a single tax for the use of the first. This made George a representative of the interests of the North American small farmers, who were affected more than any others by the taxes of the large landowners and the load taxes of the private railroads. In any case, George also obtained great support from labor.

Nevertheless, the fact that Martí gave such importance to George's work did not impede the Cuban national hero from regarding the domain of state property to include more than what George advocated. In 1890, he advocated that "...industry, the perennial and common goods of Nature not be concentrated in the hands of private monopolies for the benefit of the monopolies but in the hands of the nation for the national benefit." (Almanza, 1990, p.284)

One can appreciate how Martí adds the nationalization of industrial monopolies to George's nationalizations. Thus, we have a more advanced Martí, who is less worried about the state property's gaining space in the way he touched on in his work about Spencer.²

In the logic of his economic thinking, Martí leaves separate from the State, land exploitation, small and medium sized industrial enterprises, lending, commerce and water transport, among other non-monopolist forms. Here it is necessary to remember the constant worry of the Apostle, influenced by Spencer, about the individual's freedom so as not to be crushed by community; but we also note his concern that private property relations have a sufficiently social function of equality and dignity for man, for which it was necessary to regulate it.

Marx, for his part, apart from the limitations that he noted in Georgist doctrine, had significant points of agreement with it. Analyzing the similarities that concern us, Marx coincided with George on the need to nationalize land and charge a tax for its use. The first transition measure to be adopted by the advanced country's proletarian state is referred to in the *Communist Manifesto*: "Confiscation of property in land and application of the rent of land to public purposes." Note that the reference is made to all land, agricultural or otherwise. Nevertheless, only two countries of the disappeared Socialist world nationalized all land: the ex-Soviet Union and Mongolia. But neither of these states collected the rent for the use of that land. (Group of authors, 1976, p.17) The Marxist difference is also in the type of appropriation to be established as a strategy, with land as part of the more general concept of social property.

In this sense, it can be proposed: Prolonged research in the theoretical field and voluminous processing of the information in Marx's and Engels' works, and the development of capitalism in the second half of the 20th Century, have proved that the essential goal of social ownership of the means of production is to achieve a kind of conglomerate of corporations made up of cooperative enterprises. (Marcelo, 1996, p. 66). Marx expressed this general idea when he stated the need of "transforming social production into a harmonic and vast system of cooperative work." (Marx, 1973, p.82) Or by Lenin, when he stated that "... the cultured cooperativists' regime is socialism." (Lenin, 1987, p.389)

As for agriculture, the Marxist goal to be reached gradually in regard to social property will be linked to a corporation of cooperative enterprises that would be part of the mentioned conglomerate. But the use of agricultural and other lands would imply that rent be paid for their use.

George, on the other hand, differed by respecting the land's occupation structure as long as the state collected the rent. "It is not necessary to confiscate the land; it is only necessary to confiscate the rent" or "collect the rent through a tax", the only one left: the single tax. (George, 1996, pp. 417-418) According to George's idea the individuals who occupy land could buy, sell, donate and bequeath it. The state could be the universal owner of the land without proclaiming itself as such. Landowners would be motivated to cultivate valuable unused land.

Martí, in his turn, taking as a starting point George's essential idea, was against the perpetuation of private monopolies. He desired that they be "in the hands of the nation for the national benefit." But although he stated that "a nation that has many small owners is a rich nation" (Almanza, 1990, p.123), he preferred the petit-bourgeois agrarian model, although he stated in a chronicle about George in 1886: "All longing of civilization is to return to the simplicity and justice of the primitive apportionments." (Almanza, 1990, p.280) In a way, this grounded Martí's lively interest in collective forms of agricultural production (Almanza, 1990, pp.240-241). In a socialist country such as Cuba, such collective forms of agricultural production have had a Marxist inspiration.

The Agrarian Problem as Treated by the Founders of Marxism

While dealing with the agrarian problem, particularly with the agricultural changes in the transition period, in the first volume of *Das Kapital*, where he deals with the accumulation of capital, Marx wrote, "... capitalist production creates, with the inexorable strength of a natural process, its own negation. It is the negation of negation. It does not restore the private property already destroyed, but the individual property based on the progress of the capitalist era: in the cooperation and in the collective possession of land, and of the means of production created by work." (*Capital*, Volume I, Chapter XXIV, p.700, 1973)

Regarding the forms of possession and exploitation of the means of production in socialism, Engels said, "... socialism ... its mission does not consist of divorcing property from work, but to the contrary, it consists of gathering in the same hands these two factors of all production, factors whose divorce bring as consequence the slavery and misery of workers degraded to proletarians."³

In the same work just mentioned, Engels, referring to the expropriated lands, pointed out, "The big farms so restored to community will be handed over by us for the benefit of the agricultural workers that already cultivate them, organized in cooperatives, controlled by the community." And he continues, "... if it is socialism's duty to restore to the agricultural owners -- under social or collective terms -- the possession of large estates, after expropriating its present idle owners."

These ideas of Marx and Engels indicate that once the political power has been conquered, and in the particular case of agriculture, the immediate goal would be to restore to the dispossessed the individual property of land in cooperative forms, and that these cooperative forms are not identified with the nationalization of the exploitation of the land.

Taking the founders' thinking and associating it with the historical evolution of Cuban agriculture, we can see that by the middle of the '60's, with the creation of sugar cane cooperatives on expropriated lands, an approximation to the ideas of Marxism's founders is established, but the collection of the rent of that land is not mentioned at all. If this strategic process had continued, it would probably have evolved to arrive at conditions at least close to the ideas of Marxism's founders.

Economic Changes in Present Cuban Agriculture

The constitution of the Basic Units of Cooperative Production (UBPC) by the end of 1993 and during 1994, was a significant step for getting closer to the ideas of Marxism's founders, and, considering the extension of land exploited by collective action, also to Martí's ideas. Nevertheless, the UBPC's present difficulties along with the functioning of internal agriculture and livestock market suggest that Cuba has not yet solved the problem of the role of property in the production cycle: production, distribution, exchange, and consumption.

By the end of 1999 cooperatives represented, in their different forms, 70% of all cultivated lands of the country, and today constitute the predominant form of land use and utilization. (Table I)

TABLE I
Structure of Land Use and Possession in Cuba

	1989		1999		Fruitful		Cultivated	
	M ha.	%						
TOTAL	10972	100	10972	100	6687	10	3701	100
State's	8997	82	5890	54	2234	33	903	24
Non State's	1975	18	5082	46	4453	67	2798	76
UBPC	-	-	3117	28	2756	42	1739	47
Sugar cane			1602		1485		1346	
Other crops			1515		1271		393	
CPA	868	8	723	6	615	10	372	10
Sugar cane	235		26		23		16	
Other crops	633		697		592		356	
CSS	857	7	897	9	780	11	475	13
Individual Producers	250	3	345	3	302	4	212	6

Elaborated from data of *Cuba's Statistical Yearbooks*, 1989 and 1999.

The relations of production (economic relations) depend on how the means of production are distributed in society, on how the problem of property of these means is resolved. The form of property determines the character of the link between the producer and the means of production, not only in the process of material production, but also in the relations of exchange, distribution, and consumption. The character of the distribution, form, and amount of incomes of the members of society also depends on the form of property.

Remembering what Marx theorized to be the historical trend of capitalist accumulation, specifically that the negation of capitalist property "... does not restore the private property already destroyed, but the individual property based on the progress of the capitalist era," it is known that Marxists believed that the transition from the capitalist to the socialist system would start in the most developed countries, those that have highly developed productive forces. This implies that we have to prepare the socialist relations of production so that they do not become obstacles that throw back the great development achieved by the productive forces of the worldwide capitalist socio-economic formation.

In spite of the underdeveloped conditions of the country, Cuban agriculture had reached in the 1980s a high technological development in equipment, investments, and means of consumption per hectare, but it had a low productive economic efficiency. So, we can state that productive forces had a great development in the farming sector. Nevertheless, we have to note that the most important and active member of productive forces, the human being, the agricultural worker, grew up and labored for years on a basis of a non-competitive agriculture which was highly centralized in decisions and actions. This situation placed the worker in a weak position when dealing with the responsibility of directing and administrating the middle-level cooperative enterprise (UBPC) in the context of a highly competitive world.

This could mean that some farming activities require a transition through a previous phase of individual production as well as the need to train or qualify the managing staff to deal with competitive conditions, before changing to cooperative forms of production. In this way, agricultural producers can reach the necessary level of development that facilitates going into a higher phase of productive cooperative organization, and so reach a higher development of productive forces in all areas.

Another aspect to be defined when dealing with the problem of underutilized property is the level of unspecified time for the free use of land, which generates doubts and creates conditions leading to inadequate use and conservation of the main means of production of the farming sector.

Marxism's classics conceived of the process of restoring land to agricultural workers through the collection of rent. About this aspect Engels stated: "The great estates of the Junkers of the East of the Elbe can be given for rent without any difficulty, assuring the necessary technical management, to the present-day laborers, and can be cultivated collectively."⁴

On the other hand, when referring to the implementation of the NEP (New Economic Policy), Lenin stated, "We should not assume the immediate transition to communism...

We should build, always stimulating the peasants' personal interest. We are told that 'stimulating' the peasants' personal interest means the restoration of private property. No, we never put an end to the individual property of consumption articles and farm implements regarding the peasantry. We have abolished private property of land and peasants have run the farms without owning the soil, for example, on rented lands." ⁵

The establishment of rent contracts and of rent payment would help to eliminate social and economic lack of clarity and would make best use of land easier. In Cuba, the 82% of all the land, almost 11 million hectares, belong to the state, and no rent is collected for its use. The 18% that are left, almost 2 million hectares, can pay a rent tax to the state, maintaining the same structure of occupation as George proposes. On both forms of landed property more than 200,000 non-state enterprises of different sizes, 99.8% of all agricultural enterprises of the country, realize their production. (Marcelo and U-Echevarría, 1999, p.36)

As we have seen, Martí, George and Marx held some important points of agreement. The three of them agreed on the need of the full use of land in agriculture. They were not against the size (small or middle) of the units of agricultural production, so long these are all national property. Finally, the three of them were bound by the central idea that George, the man who most developed it, defended with bravura and passion: the idea that the state appropriate the rent of the land.

Martí said in 1886 about George's *Progress and Poverty*, "...that it has spread among Christians as a bible. It is the Nazarene's love put in the practical language of our times." (Almanza, 1990, p.273)

FOOTNOTES

(1) "Just as Darwin discovered the law of the development of organic nature, Marx discovered the law of the development of human history." (Engels, s/f, p.451)

(2) By that time, the English philosopher Hebert Spencer had written his four essays, *Man Against the State*. The second of the four, entitled "The Future of Slavery", Martí analyzed in 1884 in a newspaper article, agreeing and disagreeing with points of view of the Englishman on the consequences that the extension of State property would have in all aspects of the life of a nation. The propositions of Spencer are fundamentally based in two ideas: that all social collectivism weakens individual action, and that all social evils are the result of human nature, which is eternally faulty. In regard to the first concept, Martí, as has been shown, accepts State property in important economic sectors, while he rejects the second concept. This article can be found in Volume 15 of *The Complete Works of José Martí*.

(3) Engels F.: "The Peasant Problem in France and in Germany", *Marx's and Engels' Selected Works*, Volume II, Progress Publishing, Moscow, 1987, p.172.

(4) Engels F.: "Engels to Otto Von Boenigk", *Marx's and Engels' Selected Works*, Progress Publishing, Moscow, p.716.

(5) Lenin V. I.: "New Economic Policy and Duties of Political Instruction's Committees", *Complete Works*, Volume 44, p.172.

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