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ORIGINAL

An approach to the environmentalist thought of José Martí

Un acercamiento al pensamiento ambientalista de José Martí

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ABSTRACT

José Martí stands as a leading figure of nineteenth-century Cuban revolutionary thought, whose work, imbued with anti-colonial and humanist ideals, reveals an environmental sensitivity that anticipates contemporary ecological concerns. This study aims to examine the expressions of his environmentalist thought, its philosophical foundations, its ethical-aesthetic dimensions, his political and economic critique of extractivism, and its relevance in current debates. The research was conducted through a bibliographic review of academic databases and digital repositories, applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, and a thematic and comparative analysis that articulated categories such as ethical and aesthetic values of nature, environmental pedagogy, and the link between cultural identity and environment. Findings show that Martí reworked influences from Krausism, Romanticism, and North American Transcendentalism, integrating them into a Latin American emancipatory project where nature becomes a symbol of dignity, freedom, and sovereignty. His writings denounce the irrational exploitation of resources, defend agricultural diversity, and recognize indigenous knowledge as the basis of a harmonious relationship with the land. It is concluded that his environmentalist vision, deeply humanist, remains fully valid and offers keys to rethink the relationship between society and nature from a Latin American perspective.

Keywords: José Martí; Environment; Nature; Ecology.

RESUMEN

José Martí emerge como figura cimera del pensamiento revolucionario cubano del siglo XIX, cuya obra, marcada por el anticolonialismo y el humanismo, revela una sensibilidad ambiental que anticipa preocupaciones ecológicas contemporáneas. Este estudio se propone analizar las expresiones de su pensamiento ambientalista, sus fundamentos filosóficos, sus dimensiones ético-estéticas, su crítica política y económica al extractivismo y su vigencia en el debate actual. La investigación se desarrolló mediante una revisión bibliográfica en bases de datos académicas y repositorios digitales, aplicando criterios de inclusión y exclusión, y un análisis temático y comparativo que permitió articular categorías como valores éticos y estéticos de la naturaleza, educación ambiental y vínculo entre identidad cultural y entorno. Los hallazgos muestran que Martí reelabora influencias del krausismo, el romanticismo y el trascendentalismo norteamericano, integrándolas en un proyecto emancipador latinoamericano donde la naturaleza es símbolo de dignidad, libertad y soberanía. Su obra denuncia la explotación irracional de los recursos, defiende la diversidad agrícola y reconoce la sabiduría indígena como fundamento de una relación armónica con la tierra. Se concluye que su visión ambientalista, profundamente humanista, mantiene plena vigencia y ofrece claves para repensar la relación entre sociedad y naturaleza desde una perspectiva latinoamericana.

Palabras clave: José Martí; Medio Ambiente; Naturaleza; Ecología.

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INTRODUCTION

José Martí represents the pinnacle of 19th-century Cuban revolutionary thought, marked by his firm anti-colonial and anti-imperialist stance. Although he died at the age of 42, he left behind a wide and diverse intellectual output. He was an essayist, journalist, poet, diplomat, jurist, and philosopher.[1] His work engages in dialog with universal figures such as Socrates, Aristotle, Rousseau, and Kant, but it also fits into the Cuban philosophical tradition initiated by José Agustín Caballero and continued by Félix Varela and José de la Luz y Caballero.[1,2,3,4] Martí knew how to appropriate universal currents and transform them according to the needs of Cuba and Latin America, which allowed him to project an original way of thinking that was ahead of his time.

A less studied but highly relevant facet of his work is his sensitivity to nature and his environmentalist vision, which anticipated current ecological concerns.[5,6,7] In his chronicles, essays, and articles, he expresses a clear awareness of the relationship between human beings and the environment, where ethical, aesthetic, and political values converge. Nature appears to be an essential part of cultural identity and the struggle for emancipation, beyond mere romantic contemplation.

In a context dominated by positivism and industrialization, Martí distances himself from the utilitarian vision and proposes an integrative view that recognizes the intrinsic value of the environment. For him, harmony with nature is a condition of freedom and justice, linking his humanistic ethics with his critique of colonialism and capitalism.

The research presented here seeks to analyze this environmentalist dimension in Martí's work, its philosophical foundations, and its ethical and political implications, highlighting its relevance in contemporary debates on sustainability and ecological justice. Without formulating a systematic doctrine, Martí offers a humanistic vision of nature that is key to rethinking the relationship between society and the environment from a Latin American perspective.

METHOD

This research was conducted through a bibliographic review aimed at identifying expressions of environmentalist thought in the work of José Martí. Academic databases (Scielo, Dialnet, vLex, Amelica), digital repositories (CLACSO, UNAM, ResearchGate), and libraries specializing in philosophy and Latin American studies were consulted. The search included keywords such as José Martí, nature, environment, ecology, Latin American philosophy, and environmental education, covering texts from the 19th century to the present, in Spanish and English, to integrate original works and contemporary critical studies.

The inclusion criteria focused on Martí's texts with references to nature and education, secondary research on the environmental dimension of his thinking, and philosophical and pedagogical works that contextualize him in currents such as Krausism, Romanticism, and American Transcendentalism. Documents not directly related to environmental issues or limited to political or literary aspects were excluded.

The analysis was based on a thematic and comparative approach. The texts were classified into categories such as ethical and aesthetic values of nature, criticism of utilitarianism, environmental pedagogy, and the link between cultural identity and the environment. The narrative synthesis articulated these categories around the central thesis: Martí's vision of nature as an inseparable part of human dignity and the Latin American emancipatory project.

However, we recognize the limitations inherent in a nonsystematic review, such as bias in the selection of more accessible repositories and the possible omission of relevant sources. Given the breadth and diversity of sources, we conceive of this study as a first approach to the subject, opening space for future research.

Philosophical foundations of Martí's environmentalism

José Martí's environmentalist thinking is part of the 19th century marked by tensions between modernity and tradition and between the expansion of positivism and the humanistic search for identity in Latin America.[1] Martí was formed in this context, and his philosophy was nourished by various currents that he knew how to assimilate and transform. In Spain, while studying law and philosophy and literature, he came into contact with Krausism, a doctrine that defended social harmony and the ethical integration of human beings with their environment.[8,9,10] This influence allowed him to conceive of nature not as an object of exploitation but as part of a moral and social order.

Later, in the United States, Martí became interested in American Romanticism and Transcendentalism, especially the ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.[11,12,13] From them, he took the conception of nature as a source of spiritual and moral wisdom but adapted it to the Latin American reality, where the land and the landscape became symbols of resistance to colonialism. Martí did not limit himself to reproducing these influences: he reworked them in accordance with his emancipatory project, integrating nature as an essential element of culture, ethics, and the freedom of people. In this way, his environmentalist thinking becomes an original synthesis that anticipates contemporary concerns about sustainability and ecological justice.

Ethical-aesthetic dimensions

Martí's sensitivity to nature is expressed in multiple dimensions that combine the ethical and the aesthetic. His descriptions of landscapes, animals, and natural phenomena are imbued with a symbolic charge that turns the natural into a mirror of the human.[15] In La Edad de Oro (The Golden Age), for example, he teaches children to love and respect the earth, presenting it as a teacher of virtue and beauty. In his chronicles from New York, he celebrates the arrival of spring with poetic language that links the renewal of nature with human hope and joy, as evidenced in the following excerpt: "... with the dawn of spring, the earth dawns, hope is reborn, the sick rejoice, children frolic, eyes light up, the soul rejoices."[16]

For Martí, nature not only beautifies life but also ennobles it.[17] His poetic language is intertwined with an ethic of care, showing that respect for the environment is inseparable from human dignity.[17,18,19] This conception distances him from the utilitarian views

prevalent in his time and brings him closer to an ethic of care for the environment.[20,21] Furthermore, Martí links nature and cultural identity: in Nuestra América, the flora and fauna of the continent are symbols of authenticity, resistance, and sovereignty,[22] as opposed to foreign models that attempt to impose alien values, which demonstrates the integration of his environmentalist ethical vision into his revolutionary ideals.[23]

However, his conception of environmental care is not limited to nature alone but also addresses various aspects related to land cultivation and industrial pollution. One of the best examples is "land, however much there is, must be cultivated: and with various crops, never with just one". In this sense, we can see that caring for the land was another aspect that occupied his thoughts, as evidenced by his statements, first in the Universal Magazine, where he says: "If the earth waits and listens, why should we not extend a helping hand to the earth?"[25] and in the pamphlet Guatemala, where he says that "living on the earth is nothing more than a duty to do it good".[26]

His ecological vision also translates into pedagogical and political proposals. Martí conceives of education as a process that should form citizens who are aware of their environment and capable of building a future in harmony with nature: his thinking is ahead of the trends in environmental education, as evidenced by the fact that he perceives the act of sowing as something worthy of a true human being, which is why he says: "A seed that is sown is not only the seed of a plant but the seed of dignity"[27] and that "the best citizen is the one who cultivates the largest area of land".[28]

Political and economic criticism of extractivism

Martí was a sharp critic of the development model based on the irrational exploitation of natural resources. In his writings, he denounced the greed that destroys forests, pollutes rivers, and impoverishes the land, pointing out that the freedom of people cannot be achieved if their natural sustenance is destroyed. His defense of agricultural diversity and "natural and direct" industries[24] reveals a stance opposed to monoculture and excessive industrialization.

His criticism is not limited to a romantic defense of nature but is part of his vision of social justice. For Martí, the well-being of people is linked to the preservation of the environment, and freedom cannot be achieved if the natural sustenance of life is destroyed. Hence, he asserted that "a region without flowers is poor. A city without trees is unhealthy. Land without trees attracts little rain and bears violent fruit (...), we must take care to replace the trees that are cut down so that our heritage may always remain in bloom." This structural critique of extractivism anticipates current debates on political ecology in Latin America, where the defense of territory is directly linked to sovereignty and social equity.[29]

Martí also recognized American nature as a source of ancestral wisdom. His texts reveal respect for indigenous knowledge that lives in harmony with nature.[28,30] His assertion that "until the Indian is made to walk, America will not begin to walk well"[31] brings him closer to contemporary approaches to equity, solidarity, and respect for the environment that advocate sustainable and community-based ways of life over the extractivist model.

Relevance and contemporary connections

Although Martí lived in the 19th century, his environmentalist thinking remains fully relevant in the 21st century. His reflections on the need for a harmonious relationship between humans and nature resonate with current concerns about sustainability, biodiversity, and ecological justice. Environmental education, which is considered essential for addressing the climate crisis, has a clear precedent in Martí: teaching people to love the land and to sow seeds as an act of dignity.

His criticism of extractivism and his appreciation of indigenous knowledge connect with contemporary proposals such as buen vivir (good living) and the ecology of knowledge, which defend the interdependence between culture, politics, and nature. From this perspective, Rereading his work enriches the current ecological debate with a deeply humanistic Latin American perspective, offering ethical and political keys to addressing the environmental challenges of our time. Martí invites us to think of nature not as a resource but as a constituent part of the identity and freedom of people, a message that is essential today in the construction of sustainable alternatives to the global environmental crisis.

CONCLUSIONS

José Martí projects an environmentalist thought that draws on diverse philosophical influences and adapts to the Latin American reality, where nature appears as an essential part of the culture, ethics, and freedom of people. His work reveals an ethical-aesthetic dimension in which the natural becomes a mirror of the human, linking contemplation and dignity with values of care and respect and linking cultural identity and the environment. He formulates a political and economic critique of extractivism by denouncing the irrational exploitation of resources, defending against agricultural diversity, and recognizing indigenous wisdom as the foundation of a harmonious relationship with the earth. He remains fully relevant in the contemporary debate on sustainability, ecological justice, and environmental education, offering humanistic and y keys to rethinking the relationship between society and nature from a Latin American perspective and facing global environmental challenges.

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AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

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