Marx and Latin America Revisited

Bruno Bosteels
Cover image:

Guillermo Kuitca

Global Order, 2001

acrylic and oil on canvas

78 3/4 x 91 5/16 inches

200 x 232 cm

SW 06205

Private Collection
Fall 2010 Janey Lecture
The New School

Marx and Latin America Revisited
Bruno Bosteels

Neither Saint-Simon, nor Karl Marx, nor Marlo, nor Bakunin. Instead, the reforms that are best suited to our own bodies.

— José Martí, La Nación (February 20, 1890)

1. Brief History of a Missed Encounter

Today, the least that we can say about Marxism is that, if it were not for the use of attenuating prefixes such as “post” or “neo,” its mere mention has become an unmistakable sign of obsolescence. Thus, while in second-hand bookstores from Mexico City to Tierra del Fuego, the old manuals of historical and dialectical materialism from the Soviet Academy of Sciences keep piling up, almost nobody really seems to be referring to Marxism anymore as a vital doctrine of political or historical intervention. Rather, Marx and Marxism in the eyes of the not-so-silent majority have become things from the past. In the best-case scenario, they simply constitute an object for nostalgic or academic commemorations; in the worst, they occupy the bench of the accused in the world-historical tribunal for the trial of crimes against humanity.
Álvaro García Linera, the current Vice-President of Bolivia under Evo Morales, in an important text from 1996 written from prison where he was being held under maximum security rule on charges of subversive and terrorist activity, a text titled “3 retos al marxismo para encarar el nuevo milenio” (“Three Challenges to Marxism in the Face of the New Millenium”) and included in the collective volume *Las armas de la utopía. Marxismo: Provocaciones heréticas* (*The Arms of Utopia. Marxism: Heretical Provocations*), describes the situation as follows:

Yesterday’s rebels who captivated the poor peasants with the fury of their subversive language, today find themselves at the helm of dazzling private companies and NGOs that continue to ride the martyred backs of the same peasants previously summoned. […] Russia, China, Poland, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Communist and socialist parties, armed and unarmed “vanguards” without a soul these days no longer orient any impetus of social redemption nor do they emblematize any commitment to just and fair dissatisfaction; they symbolize a massive historical sham.¹

With regard to the destiny of Marx’s works and the politics associated with them, however, something else appears to be happening as well. The story is not just the usual one of crime, deception, and betrayal. There are whole generations who know little or nothing about those rebels of yesteryear and much less understand how they would have been able to captivate the impoverished peasants and workers with the fury of their language. On one hand, all memory seems to have been broken and many radical intellectuals and activists from the 1960s and 70s, for a variety of motives that include
guilt, shame, the risk of infamy, or purely and simply the fear of ridicule if they were to vindicate their old fidelities, are accomplices to the oblivion insofar as they refuse to work through, in a quasi-psychoanalytical sense of the expression, the internal genealogy of their experiences. Thus, the fury of subversion remains, without elaboration, in the drawer of nostalgias, with precious few publicly traversing self-criticism. What is more, the situation hardly changes if, on the other hand, we are also made privy to the opposite excess, as a wealth of personal testimonies and confessions accumulates in which the inflation of memory seems to be little more than another, more spectacular form of the same forgetfulness. As in the case of the polemic about militancy and violence unleashed in Argentina by the recent letter-confession of Óscar del Barco (“No matarás: Thou shalt not kill”), we certainly are treated to a heated debate, there can be no doubt about that, but what still remains partially hidden from view is the theoretical archive and everything that might be contained therein in terms of relevant materials for rethinking the effective legacy of Marx in Latin America.

In Latin America the reasons for amnesia are if possible even more complex. Not only has there been an obvious interruption of memory due to the military coups and the catastrophe of neoliberalism but, in addition, this lack of a continuous dialogue with the realities of the continent can already be found in the context of Marx’s own relation to Latin America. In fact, we could say that the history of the relation of Marx to Latin America is the history of a triple desencuentro, or a three-fold missed encounter.

In the first place, we find a missed encounter already within the writings of Marx. Thanks to José Aricó’s classic but long out-of-print study, Marx y América Latina, we can unravel the possible reasons behind Marx’s inability to approach with even a
modicum of sympathy the realities of Latin America. His infamous attack on Simón Bolívar (whom Marx in a letter to Engels labels “the most cowardly, brutal and detestable swine”) or his and Engels’s notorious early support for the United States invading Mexico (about whose inhabitants Marx in another letter to his collaborator writes: “The Spaniards are completely degenerated. But all in all, a degenerate Spaniard constitutes an ideal compared to a Mexican. All the vices, the showing-off, the bragging and Quixotism of the Spaniards to the third power, but with none of the solidity of the latter”) are indeed compatible with three major prejudices that Aricó attributes to Marx: the linearity of history; a generalized anti-Bonapartism; and a theory of the nation-State inherited, albeit in inverted form, from Hegel, according to which there cannot exist a lasting form of the State without the prior presence of a sense of national identity at the level of civil society—an identity whose absence, on the other hand, tends to provoke precisely the intervention of despotic or dictatorial figures à la Bonaparte and Bolívar. In this sense, the three prejudices are intimately related. It is only due to a linear conception of history that all countries must necessarily pass through the same process of political and economical development in the formation of a civil society sufficiently strong to support the apparatuses of the State.

One paradox alluded to in the second half of Aricó’s study, however, still deserves to be unpacked in greater detail. In his final texts on Ireland, Poland, Russia or India, after 1870, Marx indeed begins to catch a glimpse of the logic of uneven development of capitalism, which could have served him as well to reinterpret the postcolonial condition of Latin America. “From the end of the decade of the 1870s onward, Marx never again abandons his thesis that the uneven development of capitalist
accumulation displaces the center of the revolution from the countries of Western Europe to dependent and colonial countries,” writes Aricó. “We find ourselves before a true ‘shift’ in Marx’s thinking, which opens up a whole new perspective for the analysis of the conflicted problem of the relations between the class struggle and the national liberation struggle, that genuine punctum dolens in the entire history of the socialist movement.” If, in spite of this paradigm shift, provoked by his reflection on the supposed backwardness of cases such as Ireland or Russia, Marx is still unable to settle his accounts with Latin America by critically reevaluating the revolutionary role of peripheral countries, this continued inability would be due, according to Aricó, to the stubborn persistence of Marx’s anti-Bonapartist bias and his unwitting fidelity to the legacy of Hegel.

In his painstaking study of Marx’s complete œuvre from the point of view of peripheral countries, De demonios escondidos y momentos de revolución: Marx y la revolución social en las extremidades del cuerpo capitalista (On Hidden Demons and Revolutionary Moments: Marx and Social Revolution in the Extremities of the Capitalist Body), García Linera nevertheless raises two objections to Aricó’s interpretation. On one hand, the Bolivian theorist accuses his Argentine comrade, exiled in Mexico, of proceeding too hastily while accepting the absence of a massive or even national-popular capacity for rebellion in Latin America. According to García Linera, Marx himself never ceases to insist, over and against his allegedly regressive Hegelian baggage, on the importance of mass action, whereas Aricó would somehow be seduced by the direct revolutionary potential of the State. The “blindness” or “incomprehension” of Marx toward Latin America, then, would be due to the lack of historical sources and reliable studies on the indigenous rebellions that shook the continent since at least the end of the
eighteenth century. “This is the decisive factor. In the characteristics of the masses in
movement and as a force, their vitality, their national spirit, and so on, there lay the other
components that Aricó does not take into account but that for Marx are the decisive ones
for the national formation of the people,” affirms Linera: “There exists no known text
from Marx in which he tackles this matter, but it is not difficult to suppose that this is
because he did not find any at the time of his setting his eyes on America.” The missed
encounter between Marx and Latin America, therefore, would be due not to the lingering
presence of Hegelianisms so much as to the fact that “this energy of the masses did not
come into being as a generalized movement (at least not in South America); it was for the
most part absent in the years considered by Marx’s reflections.” It would be Aricó, not
Marx, who misjudges the Latin American reality due to a blinding adherence to Hegel.

In fact, García Linera goes so far so as to suggest that the supposed “not-seeing”
on the part of Marx is the result of a “wanting-to-see” on the part of his most famous and
prolific interpreter from Argentina: “The terrain on which Aricó places us is not that of
the reality or that of Marx’s tools for understanding this reality, but rather the reality that
Aricó believes it to be and the tools that Aricó believes to be those of Marx.” In the final
instance, however, even for García Linera it cannot be a matter of denying the
unfortunate missed encounter, or desencuentro, between Marx and América Latina. To
the contrary, in a recent lecture at Cornell University, “Marxismo e indianismo”
(“Marxism and Indigenism”), García Linera himself in turn speaks of a desencuentro
between two revolutionary logics, the Marxist one and the indigenist one, before
providing an overview of the different reasons that hampered their finding a middle
ground throughout most of the twentieth century, all the way to the tentative promise of a
possible reencounter among a small fraction of indigenous intellectuals in the last decade:

“Curiously, these small groups of critical Marxists with the utmost reflective care have come to accompany, register, and disseminate the new cycle of the indigenist horizon, inaugurating the possibility of a space of communication and mutual enrichment between indigenisms and Marxisms that will probably be the most important emancipatory concepts of society in twenty-first-century Bolivia.”

2. Martí on Marx

If Marx fails to see any revolutionary potential in the realities of Latin America, overshadowed as the latter would be by the constant temptation of despotism due to a lagging or insufficient development at the level of civil society, we should quicken to add that the miscomprehension often turns out to be reciprocal. This is the second sense of the missed encounter. Suffice it to think of “Honores a Karl Marx, que ha muerto” (“Tributes to Karl Marx, who has died”), a well-known but strangely understudied chronicle by the Cuban writer and independence fighter José Martí, written when the latter resided in New York and worked as a foreign correspondent for, among others, the Argentine daily newspaper La Nación. This chronicle has been acknowledged as being “a first pillar in the reception of Marxism in the strict philosophical sense in Latin America.” In it, Martí focuses on a commemorative event that took place in March of 1883 in Manhattan, on the occasion of Marx’s recent death.

Of this quite extraordinary chronicle, officially dated March 29, 1883 by its author and published in La Nación between May 13 and 16, 1883, I wish in the first place to single out the curious mise-en-scène. Martí, as he had done previously with Oscar
Wilde, indeed invites his distant readers to become the virtual spectators of a scene for which he would appear to have been a personal eyewitness. “Ved esta gran sala. Karl Marx ha muerto,” writes Martí, “Look at this great hall. Karl Marx has died,” repeating the visual interpellation just a few lines later: “Ved esta sala.” What we are invited to look at for obvious reasons is a velorio a cuerpo ausente, a wake in the absence of the deceased’s corpse. Of that famous Karl Marx whom the resolutions of the “impassioned assembly” in the end proclaim to be “the most noble hero and the most powerful thinker of the working world” (132-133), we only will have obtained the effigy, the figure, or the portrait: “Look at this hall. Presiding over it, wreathed in green leaves, is the portrait of that ardent reformer, uniter of men of different nations, tireless and forceful organizer” (131).

Around this absent corpse, not to say specter, Martí describes how there builds a whole collective scene of men and women who respectfully take turns to invoke and pay tribute to some aspect or other of the figure of Marx. The void of the dead man’s body thus seems to be filled, as if to compensate for the absence, by a surfeit of affectivity ranging from anger to awe. Through this public display of affect, the great hall in New York City becomes first and foremost the stage for a concrete example of what Martí considers the true labor of the coauthor of The Communist Manifesto, namely, his role as a political organizer, rather than the scientific ambitions displayed in Capital—a project of which the Cuban writer in any event only seems to have a vague idea at best and which would not begin to be translated into Spanish until 1895, when the Argentine Juan B. Justo starts his version of the first volume of Capital. “The International was his work, and men of all nations are coming to pay tribute to him,” writes Martí, but not without
immediately offering the following judgment, adopting a slightly paternalistic gendered tone that will come back toward the end of the chronicle: “The multitude, made up of valiant laborers the sight of whom is touching and comforting, displays more muscles than adornments, more honest faces than silken scarfs” (131, trans. modified). All of this, incidentally, is framed in something that we might call a moral aesthetic, or an ethics of the beauty of work, based on a normative and transcendentalist idea of nature, inspired by Emerson. “Work makes men beautiful. The sight of a field hand, an ironworker, or a sailor is rejuvenating. As they grapple with nature’s forces, they come to be as fair as nature” (131).

Despite this attempt at a natural-organicist aestheticization of the working men’s world, Martí’s chronicle never ceases to respond rather adversely to the great labor of Marx as a militant political organizer. Up to half a dozen times, Martí repeats the same reproach that Marx and his followers form the first International seek to accomplish their noble ends with wrong or misguided means: “Karl Marx has died. He deserves to be honored, for he placed himself on the side of the weak. But it is not the man who points out the harm and burns with generous eagerness to remedy it who does well—it is the man who advocates a mild remedy” (131). If this first formulation remains suspiciously convoluted, to the point of blurring the line of demarcation between the wrong and the right ways of remedying a wrong, the next phrasing does not help much to clear up the confusion either. “To set men against men is an appalling task,” writes Martí, without clarifying whether this is what he sees Marx and his followers as doing or whether he is merely describing the daunting aspect of what they are up against: “The forced bestialization of some men for the profit of others stirs our indignation. But that
indignation must be vented in such a way that the beast ceases to be, without escaping its bonds and causing fear” (131). A third phrasing seems to be needed in order to dispell all doubts regarding the main thrust of Martí’s objection. This formulation, furthermore, is absolutely crucial if we keep in mind not only the Hegelian prejudice that according to José Aricó would have kept Marx from properly understanding the Latin American reality, but also a certain ideological image of women and the limited role that Martí attributes to them in the process of social transformation:

Karl Marx studied the means of establishing the world on new bases; he awoke the sleepers and showed them how to cast down the cracked pillars. But he went very fast and sometimes in darkness; he did not see that without a natural and laborious gestation, children are not born viable, from a nation in history or from a woman in the home. (131)

Social change, even or especially when revolutionary in nature, would thus by necessity have to follow the various stages of a seemingly natural process, without allowing the latter to become hurried or premature.

Martí subsequently repeats the same criticism three more times, this time referring not just to Marx himself but to his acolytes, the members of the Workers’ International whose militant activists he sees gathered in the great hall that day in New York City. About the fellow countrymen and women of “a certain Lecovitch,” who speaks to them with Babelic confusion in English, German, and Russian, the Cuban exile says: “But no, these impatient, generous men, defiled by wrath, will not be the ones to lay the
foundations of the new world: they are the spur, and serve their purpose, like the voice of conscience that might fall asleep, but the long sharp steel of a horseman’s goad is of little use as a founding hammer” (132, trans. modified). About the German John or Johann Most, he says that his “right hand carries no balm with which to heal the wounds inflicted by his left” (132). Finally, about the meeting in general, Martí adds one last overarching note of condemnation: “Music is heard and choirs ring out, but it is not the music of peace” (133).

The reasons for Martí’s missed encounter with the internationalist politics of Marx thus would seem to be sufficiently clear. According to this hero of Cuban independence and long-time resident in the belly of the monster from the North, Marx would have been the Apostle of the religion of hatred instead of love, of war instead of the production of peace. In fact, Martí frames his account of the commemorative event for Marx in-between two strange vignettes: he thus begins his chronicle by portraying the difference between the workers’ movements in America and in Europe, and he follows his account of the Marx memorial by evaluating the possible decision of Columbia University in New York either to open its doors to female students or else to create a separate undergraduate college for women, as would eventually come to pass in 1889 with the foundation of Barnard College.

Evidently, even though in many editions these other parts are left out, there is a close connection between the two sections that immediately frame Martí’s chronicle and the central part about the commemorative event in honor of Marx. Indeed, in talking about the contrast among the tactics of workers from the Old and the New Worlds, Martí
does no more than prepare the ground in anticipation for his reproach that Marx would have fomented hatred instead of love amidst the working class:

> The future must be conquered with clean hands. The workmen of the United States would be more prudent if the most aggrieved and enraged workmen of Europe were not emptying the dregs of their hatred into their ears. Germans, Frenchmen, and Russians guide these discussions. The Americans tend to resolve the concrete matter at hand in their meetings, while those from abroad raise it to an abstract plane. Good sense and the fact of having been born into a free cradle make the men of this place slow to wrath. The rage of those from abroad is roiling and explosive because their prolonged enslavement has repressed and concentrated it. But the rotten apple must not be allowed to spoil the whole healthy barrel—though it could! The excrescences of monarchy, which rot and gnaw at Liberty’s bosom like a poison, cannot match Liberty’s power! (131).

Martí, in chronicles from the same period, will time and again reiterate this distinction in organizational style of the workers’ movements in Europe and America. Still in the same chronicle from March 29, 1883, in a segment usually not included in reproductions of his account of the Marx memorial, he restates the notion that the Europeans who arrive in New York fill the minds of the workers in the United States with the morals of hatred and resentment. He does so with his usual rhetorical flair after comparing the disproportionate numbers of people in attendance at different events taking place around the time in the United States: “Some twenty thousand people went to
the funeral of the pugilist; to the ball of a Vanderbilt, who is a Rotschild in this part of America, a thousand galant men and ladies; and ten thousand men with restless hands, coarse outfits, irreverent hats and inflamed hearts, went to applaud the fervent multilingual orators who excite the sons of labor to war, in memory of that German with the silky soul and iron fist, the most famous Karl Marx, whose recent death they honor.”

Martí, then, can almost be said to want to take the class struggle out of Marxism. Or, to put this the other way around, instead of communism he would seem to defend the common sense and calm pragmatism of the new republic’s democratic tradition. Coming from the hand of an exiled intellectual who will die on the battlefield for the independence of Cuba, his words of condemnation sound strange only if we ignore the profound admiration that he feels at the same time for the political achievements made possible in his temporary homeland through the right to vote and the freedom of expression. The Old World, by contrast, remains steeped in the century-long legacy of monarchy and despotism. Thus, in a letter to La Nación from September 5, 1884, Martí also writes: “Boats filled with hatred come from Europe: they should be covered with boats full of balsamic love.” Any direct transfer of political ideas and organizational tactics or strategies from the Old to the New World, therefore, must be considered misguided at best and disastrous at worst.

A couple of years later, in the first of two famous chronicles about the trial of the seven anarchists from the Haymarket incident in Chicago whose martyrdom we commemorate—in all parts of the world except in the nation where the events happened that gave way to this celebration in the first place—on May 1, better known outside the
United States as Labor Day or May Day, Martí similarly talks about those ideologues who come to the New World from Europe, “mere mouthpieces through which the feverish hatred accumulated over centuries among the working people in Europe comes to be emptied out over America,” and he compares them yet again unfavorably to the style of political association in the New World:

They recommended barbarous remedies imagined in countries where those who suffer have neither the right to speak nor to vote, whereas here the unhappiest fellow has in his mouth the free speech that denounces evil and in his hand the vote that makes the law that shall topple it. In favor of their foreign language, and of the very same laws they blindly ignored, they managed to obtain large masses of followers in cities where lots of Germans are employed: in New York, Milwaukee, Chicago.¹²

It would take another year, in a new chronicle on the trial, conviction and execution of the Chicago anarchists, for Martí to change his attitude dramatically. This shift in attitude can be explained by the fact that in the meantime the social struggle in this great nation, between general strikes, escalating trade-unionist demands, and violent repressions, has shortened the distance in style between the workers’ movements in Europe and America. “This republic, in its excessive worship of wealth, has fallen, without any of the restraints of tradition, into the inequality, injustice, and violence of the monarchies,” Martí observes on this occasion. Later he is even more direct: “America, then, is the same as Europe!” so that the use of violence, as an inevitable last recourse,
may now seem justified: “Once the disease is recognized, the generous spirit goes forth in search of a remedy; once all peaceful measures have been exhausted, the generous spirit, upon which the pain of others works like a worm in an open wound, turns to the remedy of violence.”

With regard to the merit of giving women entrance to the university, on the other hand, the mixed feelings and doubts that Martí expresses in his chronicle on the death of Marx translate the extent to which the ideal of an organic social change as both harmonious and natural, born no matter how laboriously “from the bosom of a nation in history” no less than “from the bosom of a woman in the home,” presupposes the tender collaboration of the “feminine soul” in its most retrograde and misogynistic aspect:

No one looks askance on the toughening of the feminine soul, for that is the outcome of the virile existence to which women are led by the need to take care of themselves and defend themselves from the men who are moved by appetite. Better that the soul be toughened than that it be debased. For there is so much goodness in the souls of women that even after having been deceived, plunged into despair, and toughened, they still exude a perfume. All of life is there: in finding a good flower. (133)

We could say that in Martí’s argument, there occurs first a displacement from politics to morals, or from the struggle of the “poor” to the plight of the “weak.” Incidentally, this displacement will be reversed much later in Fidel Castro’s imprecise recollection of Martí’s chronicle on Marx. As one Martí scholar observes: “Social
conflicts are now eminently moral problems. Their solution must be sought after, not in the change of the social system but in the creation of a moral conscience, generous and just, which would harmonize, without partialities, the interests of all.”¹⁴ But then, especially through the framing vignettes, there occurs an additional reinscription of the question of moral conscience in the sentimental context of “love” and “hatred” in the bosom of the home. This movement, though, is the exact opposite from what happens at the start of The Communist Manifesto, where the relation of man and woman—as opposed to freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, or guild-master and journeyman—precisely does not figure among the couples enumerated to exemplify the fact that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Rather, for Martí, the question of gender in the final instance appears to trump the issue of the class struggle in rather conventional ways. “Impurity is so terrible that it can never be voluntary,” the Cuban writer says still with reference to the female soul: “An educated woman will be purer. Yet how painful it is to see how the habits of a virile life gradually change these beauteous flowers into flowers of stone! What will become of men on the day when they can no longer rest their heads on a warm, female bosom?” (136). Thus, the romantic and organicistic image of the reproduction of love at home reasserts its power over Martí’s attitude with regard to what he perceives to be the problematic role of women in general in the social struggle.

3. Marx in Martí

However, this does not necessarily mean that we are left with purely negative, missed encounters between Marx and Latin America, or between Marx and Martí. On the
contrary, I would like to propose the hypothesis that the logic of the failed or missed encounter, that is, the third sense of the desencuentro, can be considered as one name among others for the unequal development of capitalism in its global phase. Marxism would then be the name for a mode of thinking of the missed encounter as such, now understood as the thought of the unlinking or of the constitutive lack at the heart of the social link. This would enable us to imagine a posthumous dialogue between Marx and Martí.

After all, as I mentioned above, starting in the 1870s, when he reads up on the cases of Ireland, Russia, Poland, Turkey and India, Marx also begins to formulate a series of hypotheses regarding the notion of uneven development that enable him to generalize a logic of contingency and unevenness for the entire capitalist world, and not only for the so-called peripheral, backward, semi-capitalist or colonial countries. Marx, as I discussed in the Preface, never fully took advantage of these hypotheses in order to take a fresh look at Latin America. However, in order to make up for this absence, we can find a strange set of indications that go in the same direction in the writings of Martí.

The issue before us at this point no longer concerns the absent corpse of Marx but the absence of his corpus in Martí’s work: How much, or which parts, of Marx’s published œuvre could Martí have read during his years in New York (or Mexico)? What did he actually read? Did he ever consult The Communist Manifesto, perhaps in the English translation that was available as early as in 1850? How much did he know, if anything at all, about this text whose 160 years we recently commemorated? Or about the project for a critique of political economy in Capital?
Even Fidel Castro, in a recent autobiographical interview with Ignacio Ramonet, confesses a certain ignorance in this regard. Or, at least, he cleverly transposes his ignorance by attributing it to the specialists of Martí’s work. “He had apparently read a little Marx, because in his works he talks about him. He has two or three magnificent phrases, when he mentions Marx, and one of them, I remember now, is ‘Given that he took the side of the poor, he deserves honour.’ And like that one, there are other phrases that praise Marx,” says Fidel, surreptitiously putting the “poor” back in the place of the “weak.” Promptly, though, the Cuban leader adds his doubts about the matter:

I’m not certain whether even the experts in Martí’s thought know what Martí knew about Marx, but he did know that Marx was a fighter on the side of the poor. Remember that Marx was fighting for the organization of workers, founding the Communist International. And Martí certainly knew that, even though those debates centred almost exclusively on Europe, and Martí of course was fighting for the independence of a colonized, slave-holding country [in another hemisphere altogether].

In reality, no matter how much the leaders of the Cuban revolution may regret this, we have no palpable proof that Martí would have been directly familiar with any of Marx’s texts. In Martí’s complete works, Marx’s name appears only four or five times, all of them in the context of open or alluded criticisms and with reference to his work as an organizer, without mention of his publications. However, we do have at our disposal an unexpected source for comparison, this time literary in nature, namely: the only novel
written by Martí, *Lucia Jerez*, also known under the title *Amistad funesta (A Funest Friendship)*) with which Martí, writing under the pseudonym Adelaida Ral, first published it in 1885 in the New York bimonthly *El Latino-americano*. In certain parts of this novel, in fact, the Cuban writer would almost seem to be summarizing, word for word, the logic of revolutionary social change that we find in so many of Marx’s classical statements which since then have been buried under mountains of orthodox and heretical glosses.

Capitalism, then, will turn out to be a gigantic machine for the production of missed encounters whose inner workings would have to be studied in painstaking detail. Thus, as we can also read in the second chronicle on the trial of the Chicago anarchists, in which Martí already looks with much more sympathy upon the ideological work of Bakunin’s or Marx’s followers: “They do not understand that they are only a wheel in the social mechanism and that in order for them to change the whole mechanism must be changed.”¹⁶ The logic of this mechanism or *engranaje* is what Martí himself, in *Lucía Jerez* as well as in many of his best-known chronicles and essays including “Nuestra América” (“Our America”) and the “Prologue to Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde’s *Poem of Niagara,*” describes as the production of structural disjunctures, maladjustments, or dismemberments at all levels of social life—from the dress code of the youth that no longer corresponds to the distinction of their soul all the way to the radical upset, or the sudden turnabout, caused by the lack of adequation between the level of economical development and the attendant social, political and cultural relations.

Here is how the narrator describes the situation in a high-sounding didactic aside in *Lucía Jerez*:
These times of ours are disjointed, and with the collapse of the old social barriers and the refinements of education, there has come into being a new and vast class of aristocrats of intelligence, with all the needs of appearance and rich tastes that follow from it, without there having been any time as of yet, in the rapidity of the turnabout, for the change in the organization and distribution of fortunes to correspond to the brusque alteration of social relations, produced by the political liberties and the vulgarization of knowledge.\(^{17}\)

In Martí’s novel, this logic of uneven development, based on a structural lack of adequation, in the first place affects the life of intellectuals in Latin America:

Since with our Spanish American heads, filled with ideas from Europe and North America, we find ourselves in our countries in the manner of fruits without a market, like excrescences of the earth that weigh down on it and disturb it, and not as its natural flourishing, it so happens that those who possess intelligence, which is sterile among us due to its ill guidance, finding themselves in need of making it fertile so as simply to subsist, devote it with exclusive excess to the political battles, in the noblest cases, thus producing an imbalance between the scarce country and the political surfeit; or else, pressured by the urgencies of life, they serve the strong man in power who pays and corrupts them, or they strive to topple him when, bothered by needy newcomers, he withdraws his abundant payment for their funest services. (117)
Thus, the very “funest,” “baneful” or “ill-fated” nature of the mysterious “friendship” alluded to in the novel’s original title, *Amistad funesta*, would somehow be related to the disastrously imbalanced outcomes of uneven and combined development. Indeed, the only other two references in the novel to the element of *lo funesto* also allude to the effects of a structural mismatch or maladjustment. Juan Jerez, for example, is said to “have given in, in his life filled with books and abstractions, to the sweet necessity, which is so often funest, of squeezing against his heart a little white hand, this one or that one, it mattered little to him; he saw in womanhood the symbol of ideal beauties more so than a real being” (118), while Pedro, the dandyish figure whose physical attractiveness is matched only by his arrogance, “saw in his own beauty, the funest beauty of a lazy and ordinary man, a natural title, that of a lion, over all earthly goods, including the greatest among them, which are its beautiful creatures” (129). But for the narrator this is only another example of “that rich beauty of a man, graceful and firm, with which nature clothes a scarce soul” (130). Friendship and love become baneful or funest precisely due to such maladjustments between the life of the mind and the life of the heart, between the ideal and the real, between the poverty of civil society and the surfeit of politics, or between physical beauty and the moral scarcity of the soul.

Some of the fragments quoted above, in particular the first one, obviously recall the famous Preface to the 1859 *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in which Marx sums up the theoretical and methodological presuppositions of his work in preparation for *Capital*. Though famous to the point of saturation, this passage deserves to be quoted at length if for no other reason than to highlight the striking terminological proximities and no less striking discrepancies when compared to Martí:
The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.\(^{18}\)

A similar passage about methodology can already be found in *The Communist Manifesto*, which Martí may or may not have been able to read or at least hear about during his years in New York City:

We see then: the means of production and of exchange, on whose foundation the bourgeoisie built itself up, were generated in feudal society.
At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged, the feudal organization of agriculture and manufacturing industry, in one word, the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder. Into their place stepped free competition, accompanied by a social and political constitution adapted to it, and by the economical and political sway of the bourgeois class.19

Even if, for the time being, we limit ourselves to a purely conceptual juxtaposition without bringing up questions of literary form, there are two important points of disagreement that immediately jump to the eye. For Martí, first of all, there is no one-directional relation of causality between what in light of the fragments from Marx has come to be known as the base and the superstructure. To the contrary, political freedom or the democratization of knowledge can also come about prior to—or without—a corresponding transformation at the level of civil society. In fact, this is precisely the problem that besets the newly emergent nations in Latin America, where formal or political independence has not been matched by social, cultural or ideological independence. But there also appears to be a second, as yet understated or implicit disagreement in Martí’s phrasing the consequences of which are, if possible, even more portentous for the interpretation of Marxism. This has to do with the presupposition, which Marx and Martí at first sight would appear to share in common, that there exists an
underlying harmony or correspondence between base and superstructure, or between the productive forces and the social relations of production with their legal, political, religious, and ideological superstructure: a correspondence interrupted only during times of revolutionary upheaval but otherwise firmly asserted as a regulative ideal by both Marx and Martí. And yet, no sooner do we take a closer look at the peculiar literary formulation of this ideal in Lucía Jerez, as opposed to Martí’s more famous statements such as his Prologue to Pérez Bonalde’s Poem of Niagara, than we have to come to the conclusion that all such presuppositions of harmony, adequation, or correspondence turn out to be inoperative, if not for the capitalist world in general then at least in the context of Latin America.

What I wish to underscore in relation to Martí’s novel indeed is not just the surprising proximity to certain phrasings from Marx’s canonical texts so much as the literary style and generic structure adopted therein. Lucía Jerez, or Amistad funesta, in fact constitutes a sentimental romance that ends in nothing less than the violent destruction of all the ideals of natural or harmonious development for which Martí, in his chronicle about the death of Marx, thought he could still count on the support of the feminine soul. The melodrama of ill-fated friendship and unrequited love thus ends with the brutal assassination of Sol—the adolescent whose physical beauty at the same time is supposed to embody the moral ideal as well—at the hands of her friend and potential rival Lucía Jerez. Juan Jerez, on the other hand, never manages to fulfill his historical role as the story’s organic intellectual, his dream of becoming a man of letters—more specifically, a lawyer—at the service of the poor indigenous peasants. To be sure, like Marx whom Martí does praise as “a man consumed with the desire to do good” who “saw
in everything what he bore within: rebellion, the high road, combat,” Juan Jerez too
seems destined for a higher moral mission: “Juan Jerez’s was one of those unhappy souls
that can only do what is grand and love what is pure” (119). And yet, in the end, his
obsession with righting the wrongs of the whole universe, his nostalgia for the heroic
grandeur of epic deeds, and his well-nigh masochistic sense of duty lead him to an
attitude of the “beautiful soul” whose only proof of moral integrity is that it is inversely
proportionate to the sordidness of the world in which despite everything he is forced to
circulate.

This melodramatic orientation will have great repercussions in the imagination of
the political Left in Latin America throughout much of the twentieth century. In fact,
together with the detective novel, melodrama seems to be one of the recurrent forms for
thinking politics today. In order to understand this, the traditional argument according to
which the melodramatic struggle over good and evil provided much-needed moral
anchorage in the midst of the great social and political upheaval that shook Western
Europe after the French Revolution, will then have to be extended and transposed onto
those more recent times of ours that are postrevolutionary in the much more radical sense
of having lived through the decline and fall of the very idea of the revolution itself. “Even
literature confronts the theme of the institutional revolution (for many the revolution
betrayed) through melodrama or mythification,” as Carlos Monsiváis writes in an
important essay, “Mexico 1890-1976: High Contrast, Still Life,” included in Mexican
Postcards: “In melodrama dominant morality is extenuated and strengthened, governed
by a convulsive, shuddering faith in the values of poetry.”

On the other hand, in the pre-revolutionary context of Martí’s Lucía Jerez, as Marx and Engels also keenly intuited in
their commentary on Eugène Sue in *The Holy Family* and as Althusser would confirm much later in a central text in *For Marx*, melodrama still provides an ideal space in which to elaborate and experiment with the multiple effects of uneven development as the logic of the missed encounter—whereby the latter can be read not only as the result of Marx’s defective knowledge about Latin America, nor only as the tactical and strategic error for which Martí partly yet also consistently reproaches Marx, but rather as the very structure of world capitalism.

Through a melodrama complete with a violently unhappy ending, we thus arrive at the negation of all the ideals of harmonious development modeled upon the family or the hacienda—to the point where we would have to conclude that for Martí, at least in the realm of narrative experimentation, perhaps no less than for a radical reading of Marx that could find inspiration in Freud’s and Lacan’s psychoanalysis, there is not, nor can there be in the current circumstances, any adequation or correspondence between base and superstructure, or between the social relations of production and the economical development of the productive forces. This is also, incidentally, the conclusion arrived at by someone like Slavoj Žižek in his foundational book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: “How do we define, exactly, the moment—albeit only an ideal one—at which the capitalist relation of production become an obstacle to the further development of the productive forces? Or the obverse of the same question: When can we speak of an accordance between productive forces and relation of production in the capitalist mode of production? Strict analysis leads to only one possible answer: *never.*”21 In all the hitherto existing history of humankind, then, there would be no agreement except in
disagreement, no harmony except in conflict, and no encounter except in a missed encounter.

---


2 Most of the documents have been collected in Spanish in the volume Sobre la responsabilidad: No matarás (Córdoba: El Cíclope/La Intemperie/Editorial de la UNC, 2007). In English, see the translation of Óscar del Barco’s original letter and the accompanying dossier with responses by leading intellectuals in Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies 16.2 (2007): 111-182. Some of the most provocative replies to del Barco do not appear in this special dossier in English, for instance the answer from León Rozitchner, “Primero hay que saber vivir. Del Vivirás materno al No matarás patriarcal,” originally published in El Ojo Mocho 20 (Spring 2006), as well as the debate between Elías Palti, “La crítica de la razón militante. Una reflexión con motivo de La fidelidad del olvido de Blas de Santos y el ‘affaire del Barco’” and Horacio Tarcus, “Elogio de la razón militante. Respuesta a Elías J. Palti,” Políticas de la memoria 8-9 (Summer 2009). More generally, the overload of memoirs and testimonies about the militant past of the 1960s and 1970s has been commented upon by Beatriz Sarlo, Tiempo pasado (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2005); by Omar Basabe and Marisa Sadi in La significación omitida: militancia y lucha armada en la Argentina reciente (Buenos Aires: Catálogos, 2008); and by Hugo Vezzetti, Sobre la violencia revolucionaria. Memorias y olvidos (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2009). For a wider variety of perspectives, see also the essays collected in La memoria en el atril: Entre los mitos de archivo y el pasado de las experiencias, ed. Horacio González (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2005); in Crítica del testimonio: Éssays sobre las relaciones entre memoria y relato, ed. Cecelia Vallina (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo, 2009); and in Pasados en conflicto: Representación, mito y memoria, ed. María Inés Mudrovic (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2009).

3 Aricó, Marx y América Latina, 65 y 68. I develop this hypothesis in my reading of José Marti in chapter 1. As part of Aricó’s vast effort at divulging the classics through the journal and book series of “(Cuadernos de) Pasado y Presente,” Marx and Engels’s dispersed writings on Latin America have been collected in a single volume in Spanish, Materiales para la historia de América Latina (Mexico City: Pasado y Presente, 1979). This volume should be read in conjunction with Marx, Imperio y colonia: Escritos sobre Irlanda (Mexico City: Pasado y Presente, 1979) and Escritos sobre Rusia (Mexico City: Pasado y Presente, 1980). The English edition of Marx and Engels, On Colonialism. Articles from the New York Tribune and Other Writings (New York: International
Publishers, 1972), has also been translated in this same important collection of “Cuadernos Pasado y Presente” as Escritos sobre el colonialismo (Mexico City: Pasado y Presente, 1973). For a study of this editorial project and Aricó’s contribution to Marxism and Gramscianism in Latin America, see Raúl Burgos, Los gramscianos argentinos: Cultura y política en la experiencia de Pasado y Presente (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2004).


5 García Linera, ibid.

6 Ibid., 250.


8 Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, Transformaciones del marxismo, 28. See also Horacio Tarcus, Marx en la Argentina: Sus primeros lectores obreros, intelectuales y científicos (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2007), 121. A month earlier, as Tarcus discusses, La Nación had in fact already published a detailed intellectual and political portrait under the title “Karl Marx. Fundador de la Internacional” (see Tarcus, 119-120).

9 José Martí, “Karl Marx ha muerto,” Obras completas, ed. Isidro Méndez (La Habana: Lex, 1948), vol 1, tomo II, 1516-1521. All subsequent Spanish quotations in the body of the text are drawn from this edition. The most recent English translation appears as “Tributes to Karl Marx, who has died,” in José Martí, Selected Writings, ed. and trans. Esther Allen (New York: Penguin, 2002), 130-139. All English quotations are taken from this last edition. In addition to the two prior English publications of (parts of) this chronicle cited by Esther Allen, however, I should mention that a two-page version was also published as “On the Death of Karl Marx,” which opens the anthology Marxism in Latin America, ed. Luis E. Aguilar (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 102-103. For an official commentary from socialist Cuba, see Armando Hart Dávalos, “Martí y Marx, raíces de la revolución socialista de Cuba,” Camino a lo alto: Aproximaciones marxistas a José Martí (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2006), 324-353. See also the brief commentary by Luis Alvarenga, “El humanismo de Marx desde la perspectiva de José Martí,” which appears in El marxismo hoy: una lectura crítica a 140 años de El Capital, a special monographical issue of Estudios Centroamericanos 707 (2007): 849-853.


11 Ibid., 1561.
Martí, “El proceso de los siete anarquistas de Chicago,” Obras completas, ibid., 1736-1737. This letter-chronicle, also published in La Nación, where it appeared on October 21, 1886, bears the date of September 2, 1886 as the time of its purported composition. However, as Ernesto Mejía Sánchez has recently documented, it was first published with only slight variations in the Mexican newspaper El Partido Liberal, on September 10, 1886, with the listed date of August 22, 1886. See José Martí, Nuevas cartas de Nueva York, ed. Ernesto Mejía Sánchez (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1980), 213.

Martí, “Un drama terrible,” ibid., 1844-1845 y 1847. English translation as “Class War in Chicago: A Terrible Drama,” Selected Writings, 199-200. This second chronicle about the tragic events of the Chicago Haymarket bears the date of November 13, 1887. It was published first in El Partido Liberal, December 27, 29 and 30, 1887; and then in La Nación, on January 1, 1888, with the same listed date and place of “N.Y., November 13, 1887.” For an analysis of the dramatic shift in perspective between these chronicles, see Roberto Fernández Retamar, “A un siglo de cuando José Martí se solidarizó con los mártires obreros asesinados en Chicago,” Valoraciones martianas 232 (1988): 59-70; and Susana Rotker, The American Chronicles of José Martí: Journalism and Modernity in Spanish America, trans. Jennifer French and Katherine Semler (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), 99-100. Federico Fridman also revisits the problem in an unpublished paper for my seminar “Critical Theories: Marx and Freud in Latin America.”


Fidel Castro with Ignacio Ramonet, My Life: A Spoken Autobiography, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Scribner, 2008), 153-154. Fornet-Betancourt suggests, in Transformaciones del marxismo, that Martí may have been more familiar with utopian-socialist and anarchist thought and that he actually seems to favor Bakunin over Marx. In this regard, Martí’s experience in Mexico City between 1875 and 1876 seems to have had a formative effect on him. “Indeed, it is highly illuminating for the purposes of this work to see how Martí, who had had the chance to witness the discussion of socialist utopian ideas in Mexican working class circles around 1876, insists precisely on the need to differentiate and clarify theoretically the very term of socialism,” this critic writes: “This fact must be underscored because it is a strong argument in favor of the thesis which holds that Martí knew much more about the socialist currents of his time than what is explicitly stated in his writings” (28-29). An interesting coincidence in this regard links Martí to the historiographical work of Paco Ignacio Taibo II: the latter indeed is the editor of a collection of writings from the era about the strike of the hatmakers or sombrereros in Mexico City, about which Martí wrote a sympathetic chronicle. See Martí, “Beneficio de los sombrereros en huelga,” first published in Revista universal 131 (June 10, 1875), included in the anthology La huelga de los sombrereros. México 1875, ed. and with an introduction by Paco Ignacio Taibo II (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Históricos del Movimiento Obrero Mexicano, 1980), 68-71.

Martí, “Un drama terrible,” 1847.
20 Carlos Monsiváis, “Mexico 1890-1976: High Contrast, Still Life,” *Mexican Postcards*, ed. and trans. John Kraniauskas (London-New York: Verso, 1997), 21. John Kraniauskas is obviously right on the mark when in his introduction he makes this the major theme of this chronicler’s work: “Much of Monsiváis’s work may be thought of as investigating melodrama—not just as a genre, but as the product of an uneven and transcultural modernity in Mexico—as if it were something like what Raymond Williams has called a ‘structure of feeling’ (as formulated in *Marxism and Literature*)” (xvii). Or, as Peter Brooks writes: “We may legitimately claim that melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era,” in *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 15. Francine Masiello already proposes to read melodrama as a gendered subversion of the typical “foundational fictions” of the nineteenth century in Latin America, studied by Doris Sommer in her book of this same title. “Melodrama links the crisis of modernity to desire and to the body, aside from facilitating an investigation into the processes of representation,” Masiello writes: “To put this still more radically, I propose that it is impossible to narrate the chaos of the fin de siècle in Latin America without melodrama,” in Masiello, “‘Horror y lágrimas’: Sexo y nación en la cultura del fin de siglo,” *Esplendores y miserias del siglo XIX. Cultura y sociedad en América Latina*, ed. Beatriz González Stephan, Javier Lasarte, Graciela Montaldo and María Julia Daroqui (Caracas: Monte Ávila/Equinoccio/Ediciones de la Universidad Simón Bolívar, 1995), 457-472, quoted 460. Among the examples discussed in this article is Martí’s *Lucía Jerez*.