

Keeping Alive the Spirit of the Independents of Color

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“Redemptions have been theoretical
and formal:
they must be effective and fundamental”

José Martí

Somewhere between the praise of some and criticism of others of the *Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration* (CIR), I feel obliged to testify to the fact that it is thanks to the CIR that I know anything substantial about the Independent Party of Color, its program and the massacre experienced by thousands of its members in 1912.

It was at one of the any activities carried out by this Cuban civic society, which is unrecognized, repressed and reviled by those in power since 1959, that I learned upon hearing a brilliant presentation by my brother, Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas, about that Party's programmatic underpinnings. Anyone who reads said programs—not even knowing who created the group—surely would conclude that the Cubans who crafted it were way ahead of their time, visionaries who in practice sought to achieve something more akin to the Cuba dreamt of by the Apostle (Martí), a Cuba “with all, and for the good of all,” and not

just for blacks and *mestizos*, something of which some have attempted to convince those who are blind and disloyal.

Although each and every one of this program's points merits and would serve as the basis for elaborating and developing viable projects—even with today's conditions—I will limit myself to point out that these independence men-turned-Independents envisioned a penal reform that would create true correctional institutions—since most of the people who went to prison were poor and illiterate, and they thought they should be taught a trade in order to facilitate their more successful reintegration into society.

Also poor and illiterate, at least functionally illiterate are those who fill the more than two hundred prisons maintained by the Castro brothers' tyranny. It may be the case that the statistics show that we have the most educated penal population in the world, something that was said about our prostitutes, too, at another moment. Why not see this officialist bragging as an attempt to defend the indefensible?

This ‘bragging right’ is contradicted by the fact that high school diplomas are awarded indiscriminately, provided that these high

graduation rates are used as window dressing for socialism or the Revolution—two things in which only dupes or parasites of world leftism believe.

But today's Cuban prisoners are not the only ones at the margins, or beyond them. There are also thousands of men and women outside of them who lack adequate preparation and can only work in the nation's pseudo-economy, in positions that barely require qualifications. Poverty lords it over these social groups and is generationally reproduced in a fateful trend.

In a country where social ascension is not achieved through merit, but rather through unconditional loyalty to the *caudillo* and institutions that he controls like puppets, the appropriation of knowledge stops making sense as a spiritual good and practical benefit for many who take the easy path of opportunistic, double morality, and the inability, ignorance or self-apathy of those resigned to live in slavery.

The restating of an objective

The learning of a trade, particularly in the context of distance learning, is potentially effective and proven in our very own experience. This is important not only for decreasing the number of exconvicts amongst the really poor population, in general, and among blacks and *mestizos*, particularly, but also as a possible path to reducing the disadvantages that have been accumulated by the children of our race.

The proposal is to cover the cost of distance learning tuition (correspondence schools) for young Cubans who cannot afford it otherwise, so that they can obtain the knowledge, training and skills necessary to make them competitive in the labor market.

Antecedents

During the 1990s, the *Corriente Martiana* [Martí Current], another independent, civil group, conceived of and carried out the development of a project whose goal was identical. They called it *Estudios por Correspondencia para Jóvenes Cubanos* [Correspondence Studies for Young Cubans].

This project was inspired by knowledge about the opportunities that opened up for thousands of Cubans prior to 1959, through basic correspondence education from U.S. institutions like Hemphill and the National School. Many refrigeration, radio and television technicians, electricians, agricultural technicians, and even engineers have been educated thus, through motivated, self-learning and materials from these schools.

Another source of inspiration was the social impact achieved at Cabañas by the AMOR course (Learn Typing, Spelling and Editing course) which ended up offering these fields for 18 young people at 24 45th Avenue, in Cabañas (a Mariel neighborhood, in Artemisa province). These youth were asked to speak about what these courses had done for their lives, and 8 of 13 were adamant that they owed their ability to get employment to them. This experience demonstrated that it was possible to have notable and favorable social impact on low-income youth and communities, if they can find competitive and comparative employment advantages in tune with the demand for work in the areas in which they live.

How to do it?

The distance education project for youth requires a simple structure. In the first place, let us consider those who donate the financial resources. Just to be entirely clear, it is good

for the donors to be in direct contact with the beneficiaries. In the second place, one needs a team somewhere abroad to promote the project, administer its resources, formalize contracts of study with the chosen schools, realize mailings to the island, put donors and beneficiaries in contact, and keep continuously coordinate the island-based team. The island team (its head) is responsible for finding potential beneficiaries, carrying out interviews and other procedures for determining their potential abilities, determination and vocation.

Selections would be made according to real potential, and collegially, by members of the distance education department. Whenever possible, there would be an attempt to have several students share the materials, so that the investment's social impact could be maximized.

Expected impact

The time they committed to these studies would immediately contribute to distancing youth from the temptation of participating in evasive activities as a result of lacking hope during a crisis that has now lasted more than 20 years, and before which the government has everyday shown itself to be more and more unable to resolve.

In the midterm, there would be the possibility of better paid jobs for those who attain

the changing knowledge and skills that would match the inevitable changes that the country has to undergo, at a pace determined by how much and how soon resistance to the forces of change dwindles.

In the long term, this experience could turn the youth of today into teachers of these disciplines, so that they would then be in a position to act as multipliers, that is: using other youth as assistants and teaching them the secrets of their trades. This last, informal mechanism, benefited youth prior to 1959; they began as apprentices sent by their parents to study with trade masters. It was from masters to their descendants or apprentices that most trades were taught, due to the shortage of schools, or the impossibility of attending them for a number of reasons.

If there could be distance education at prisons, it would mean a better chance for the reintegration into society of its beneficiaries upon completing their sentences. This was the vision of the Independents of Color. Advances in communications technology could make its practical implementation today quite easy.

In addition to whatever symbols, and the fact that that we activists still pursue our ancestors' goals on behalf of true equality among human beings—and even for breaking down of barriers and racial differences—distance education would be a way to maintain their spirit alive for times to come.