

*El trabajo extensionista del sistema penitenciario cubano.  
Una experiencia basada en el ideario martiano  
The extension work of the Cuban prison system. An  
experience based on Marti's ideology*

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## Resumen

La confianza en el mejoramiento humano que nos legó Martí se hace evidente cuando participamos en tareas de gran impacto social como lo es la contribución a la reeducación del sancionado penalmente por la ley y que se encuentra recluso en las prisiones del Estado. En el presente abordaremos las cuestiones principales del Sistema Penitenciario en Cuba, que conforman el Sistema Educativo, en función de ofrecer al sancionado el tratamiento que posibilite su posterior inserción en la sociedad, y las particularidades de algunas experiencias comunitarias desde la Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas.

**Palabras clave:** Sistema educativo; Reinserción social; Mejoramiento humano; Trabajo extensionista

## Abstract

The confidence in human improvement that Martí bequeathed to us becomes evident when we participate in tasks of great social impact, such as contributing to the re-education of those penalized by law and who is being held in state prisons. In the present we will address the main issues of the Penitentiary System in Cuba, which make up the Educational System, in order to offer the sanctioned the treatment that enables their subsequent insertion into society, and the particularities of some community experiences from the Central University "Marta Abreu" From Las Villas.

**Keywords:** Educational system; Social reintegration; Human improvement; Extension work

## Introduction

Penitentiary institutions or the penitentiary system is the term used to designate the institutions or the system established for the fulfillment of the penalties provided for in judicial sentences; especially the penalties of imprisonment, whose purpose, in contemporary criminal law and prison law, is the social reintegration of the convicted person (inmate or prisoner).

Prisons owe their existence to the very emergence of classes, state and law, was a consequence of the slave system, which gave rise to the division of society into antagonistic classes.

It is in this social economic formation where the prison arises in order to retain the man so that he could not avoid the penalty that would later be imposed on him, initially directed at the slaves as an exploited class that could attempt against the property of their slavers.

In the Fuero Juzgo or Lex Visigothorum the term “prison” was first mentioned, but it did not elaborate on its conditions or the treatment given to prisoners. The sanction does not have only the coercive purpose before the commission of a crime, among its purposes is also to re-educate the punished. In this sense, the penitentiary system should be organized and the detention centers have the characteristics that enable adequate treatment.

At the revolutionary triumph in Cuba, on January 1, 1959, the prison conditions represented torture, cruel and degrading treatment, so the need to reverse such a situation became a priority for the Cuban State. For this, a humanist and guaranteeing prison legal order was required, which regulated, from the architectural forms with adequate conditions of habitability and hygiene to the sanctioned, to the concretion of the educational purpose of the sanction, within the framework of the ethical and moral principles that are they were beginning to build, so that they would be able to reintegrate back into society.

Numerous transformations were carried out in our country in the prison system, with the full support of government structures, under the premise that the Socialist State cannot be considered alien to the destiny of any man and its task is to transform it into someone useful.

In the same way, society has contributed to educational treatment, through the creation of programs, from the community environment and the insertion of educational institutions and mass organizations, which are inserted in the various programs that the system itself has. In the present we will address the main issues of the Penitentiary System in Cuba, which make up the Educational System in order to offer the sanctioned the treatment that enables their subsequent insertion into society, and the

particularities of some community experiences from the Central University "Marta Abreu" from Las Villas.

## Development

Most of the vices inherited from Spain in four centuries of colonial rule passed to the pseudo republic in 1902, subject to the new formula of Yankee imperialism, and they only disappeared with the triumph of the Revolution on January 1, 1959. One of the worst inherited blights was the ruthless and cruel prison regime that imposed the penalty as punishment, which subsisted with the same rigors as in previous times, the prison in colonial Cuba was described by our Apostle, with the most vigorous accusations; in the political prison, which covers from 1902 to 1958, testimonies such as "El Presidio Modelo", by Pablo de la Torriente Brau and "La Prisión Fecunda", by Fidel Castro Ruz, stand out.

With the revolutionary triumph, a process of advance began in the Cuban Penitentiary System, eliminating the centers that did not meet the slightest conditions for the treatment of inmates. To date, new penitentiary establishments with closed and open regimes have been built, prisons have been humanized based on the task of educating men, and new methods are being devised every day aimed at more efficient work in prison treatment.

One of the fundamental principles of the Cuban Penitentiary System is that of the corrigibility of the man who has committed a crime, that the sanctioned person return to society in a position to insert himself into it and that he does not reoffend in new criminal behavior, from the implementation of the school and trade instruction, as a way for them to have options to meet expectations in their lives. Similarly, socially useful work, according to the principle established in our Constitution. Society is responsible for the individual returning to her social environment in conditions to respect the laws.

The system is directed by the Ministry of the Interior, it is based on the integration of principles, concepts, procedures, forces and means that guarantee the operation of the centers destined for the internment and treatment of the inmates. To meet its objectives, it is required that the facilities have the minimum conditions to prepare people in the environment, it also requires the organization of all the aspects that make up prison life.

The penitentiary activity is configured by two main areas, that of the regime and that of the treatment, the first constitutes the activity aimed at achieving an orderly coexistence in the development of the ordinary life of a penitentiary establishment and the second is seen as an activity aimed at achieving the main purpose of the custodial sentence, reeducation and social reintegration.

Treatment involves permanent work with people deprived of liberty from the moment they enter the prison, in order to achieve a comprehensive general culture in the prisoner.

Although it does not appear collected as such, the issue of willfulness

ariness is transcendental, since it depends on the acceptance by the inmate and her full collaboration in the application of any technique, for a favorable prognosis in her subsequent social insertion. The inmates are the object of a political-educational work consisting of a group of activities and various programs, within which we can point out school instruction, the universalization program, training in trades, the patriotic audiovisual program, labor education, moral, formal and legal, cultural, sports and recreational activities, individual and collective emulation systems.

The contribution of the university, as an educational institution, has been important in this political-educational work project to achieve the social reintegration of these inmates. Students from different specialties, fundamentally from Law, Psychology, Sociocultural Studies, Sociology, among others, have directed their extension activities towards these penitentiary centers where, at the same time as they are inserted in the reeducation program designed, they acquire valid knowledge for your future professional life. The “Marta Abreu” Central University of Las Villas has developed actions in these centers, ranging from presentations by artistic brigades, sports exchange, short courses, talks, among other activities. This has not been a uniquely university experience, but also forms part of the integrated work of a group of institutions, which also includes the University, and which is led by the Union of Young Communists, in coordination with the Directorate of Prisons.

In this sense, the course on the life and work of José Martí is remarkable, a course that was initially conceived as a cycle of talks and ended up being a course of several months, where those edges of Martí's thought were worked together with the interns where it attests to its security in human improvement and the vindication of men. It was an experience of good results, because the mere fact of helping these men discover and understand Martí was worth the effort. In that course they understood that, despite having been sanctioned, they had a chance and that society trusted them and was willing to receive them redeemed.

In conjunction with the Culture Sector of the Municipality of Santa Clara, where our center is located, we developed a very beautiful and complicated experience a few years ago. We present a proposal for an extension course on the life and work of José Martí, a topic that is always so necessary for our people, which was accepted, but at the same time, we received another: to teach this course at the Provincial Penitentiary Center, where the promotion of the figure of our National Hero was being

carried out by the Center's Reeducation Department, but very spontaneously and without sufficient knowledge.

Accepted the proposal, we went to the Penitentiary Center and established the appropriate coordination to start the work. The first encounter with the reality of a prison was disconcerting and, at the same time, painful.

The gigantic work that our Revolutionary Government has carried out to achieve the adequate training and education of our children and young people, and the amount of very expensive resources that have been invested, even in stages of serious economic damages to guarantee the future of young generations. That is why it is shocking and sad to see the number of young people, aged between 16 and 22, who are held there for various reasons, but all for incorrect behavior in society.

An informative 10-week course was planned with some hours dedicated to the analysis of some texts from Martí that were easy for them to understand, as they did not know exactly the cultural level that the group possessed. At the beginning, communication with them is not very easy. They were reserved, sullen, and a little skeptical. The group consisted of 17 inmates and, with the exception of two, the rest hardly knew Martí.

They advised us to be very careful in the way we addressed them, not to ask them indiscreet questions about the reasons for their sentences, or anything that forced them to say what they did not want, because in one way or another, they all had certain complexes and they felt marginalized by their status as inmates.

Firstly, we began to inquire about the living conditions in the Prison, and the attention provided by the Center's Reeducation Department was very illuminating. We visited the bedrooms, the dining rooms, the kitchen, the visiting room, we talked with other reeducators and we learned about the family situation of many of the new students. With all this vision, much broader than that of the first day, we were able to face the difficult task of sowing the Martí seed in a low-fertilized and little-worked field.

With a language not vulgar, but accessible to all, we began the course with the revolutionary definition of the content of the Martí work and special emphasis was placed on the Martí conception of human society supported by ethical principles. I think that knowing the meaning of Martí categories such as Man and Flock, and being able to appreciate the possibilities of human fulfillment that Martí gives from them, allowed an opening in communication with Martí's thought. We had the feeling that they had a glimpse of a new possibility of remaking themselves socially and towards that educational

aspect we directed the greatest effort, since we understood that class would not be enough for them as appropriation of knowledge alone.

At the beginning of the course they always assigned a custodian to be present during class to avoid any abnormality. Afterwards we were left alone and they were more open and improved their participation in the course activities, which lasted 15 weeks. The most important aspects of José Martí's life were made known, from his birth to his death and together with them his most representative works in each period, from which his reading was oriented for a later analysis. Needless to say, *The Political Prison in Cuba* was a must-read, not only for its literary and testimonial value, but for what it represented from an educational point of view for the students.

Among others, the following phrases from Martí were object of collective analysis, with the aim of making them reflect on their own, without the need for a sermon with cold words:

- Helping those who need it is not only part of duty, but also happiness.
- The barbarians who entrust everything to force and violence build nothing, because their seeds are hatred.
- I have faith in human improvement, in the future life, in the usefulness of virtue.
- A man who hides what he thinks, or does not dare to say what he thinks, is not an honest man.
- The first job of man is to reconquer, it is urgent to return men to themselves.

As the course progressed they trusted us more. They told us about their problems, why they were there and their decision never to repeat the offense. We learned that many of them barely received adequate attention at home in their formative stage, that they did not choose their friends well, and that they mistakenly sought an easy way to live. If it is sad to know all that, it is also sad to hear them say that "for the first time a teacher who comes here treats us well."

According to the school level they have, they receive classes in night sessions of the different subjects of the education levels of the Ministry of Education, but these teachers do not always realize the double function they have in that place and scenes are produced that far from educating, they encourage the prisoner's rebellion.

Each work session was a new experience, sometimes enjoyable, sometimes not. But, without a doubt, the one that most impressed us and gave us the true measure of how far they had been motivated, was when, on one occasion, attendance was very scarce for different reasons and the reeducator, out of pity

for us, took the classroom to a group that had never attended the course and of course didn't even know what it was about there. That group did not behave properly and made us feel bad all the time. When the class ended, the students told us that they should not accept that situation again and that they were not going to allow us to spoil the class

The group enjoyed the slide show on José Martí. Many of them had never seen a slide before. We also auditioned for the Simple Verses and the Free Verses with music, and in the end, they chose a theme to prepare a work to participate in a contest organized by the Juventud Rebelde newspaper. Participation or not in this contest was highly controversial, as they feared that they would not be accepted upon learning of their status as inmates. It was necessary to convince them and explain the absurdity of that fear. This shows the sense of inferiority that, unconsciously, prevails in them, the fear of social rejection of the crime committed, even if they have already expiated it. It is necessary to reflect deeply on this, these young people need help and society offers them, but do we all reach out with equal dedication?

Parallel to the development of the course, other cultural activities were conceived with the inmates. Exhibitions of painting and pyrography of an inmate were held, both in the prison and in the university and in the House of Culture of Santa Clara. With the help of an instructor from the House of Culture, a cultural festival was held in the prison with the participation of inmates who are fans of music, dance and theater. They also formed their literary workshop and this was systematically attended by the municipality's literary adviser, who was closely linked to our work.

To stimulate the improvement in the behavior of the inmates, the Department of Reeducation asked us for help in carrying out some cultural activities. The best detachment was selected and they were granted a visit from their relatives and, all gathered together, a cultural show was presented with university fans and the prison itself, without any reservations or differences between them. This activity set a precedent and they began to think about how to obtain the right to participate in an equal event, since for the first time they were given the opportunity to participate with their family in such an enjoyable activity.

The encounter with Martí opened up a range of possibilities for these men, the majority of whom were young, made them reconsider and rethink their lives. Many swore to me never to enter a prison again. Hopefully it has been. Actually, this experience marked my behavior and made me redo my work strategy, where, first of all, the vocation to serve must prevail, in favor of human and social improvement. That is one of the goals of the extensionist of the present Cuban University.

In its collaboration to achieve the social reintegration of inmates, the university also offers other possibilities, such as the performance of socially useful work within the university campus, which is remunerated and has the possibility of relating to a different environment than that of where they come from and see a world with other possibilities for them.

This is a job that requires patience, love and trust in the human being. The whole of society still does not accept a former prisoner in their womb and this makes them feel inferior and rejected. The support that the University can provide in reversing this situation is very important, therefore, the Prosecutor's Office, the Ministry of the Interior (Minint), the University and other organizations and institutions, collaborate to achieve what is a common objective: to return to society a man fit for harmonious coexistence with his fellow men, attached to the law and with acquired values that make him a promoter of social good.

The Cuban prison regulations do not distinguish whether these experiences constitute a right or a stimulus, it only points out that they have the objective of regulating the individual conduct of the inmate and serve as a trial period for their social adaptation. However, it is worth highlighting the wisdom of the appearance of the same, since certainly the inmate is interrelated in short periods with the social environment, preparing for his final or anticipated discharge.

## **Conclusions**

The Cuban Penitentiary System is in tune with the conditions required for compliance with the reeducational purpose of the sanction. The structure and conception of the system is based on the application of an Educational System aimed at the social reintegration of the inmate, combining prison regime and treatment to achieve its goals.

The University, from its extension process, contributes in an important way to achieve the social reintegration of the inmates, at the same time that this activity fosters a better training of its future professionals by putting them in contact with a world as complex as that of the prisons, allowing them to develop skills in the treatment of the different cases found there.

Contact with the ideology of Martí favors a change of attitude in the way of thinking and assuming the reality of the inmates, provided that the message from Martí reaches them simple and plain, full of love and respect.



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