
José Carlos Mariátegui's Indo-American Socialism

BY

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José Carlos Mariátegui was Latin America's most original revolutionary thinker, who combined Marxist analyses with the vernacular of regional popular movements. Ninety years after his premature death, his work is strikingly relevant.

Dedicated to the memory of Ricardo Melgar Bao (1946-2020), a Mexican-Peruvian historian and José Carlos Mariátegui scholar.

Ninety years ago, José Carlos Mariátegui passed away in Lima. Only thirty-five years of age at the time, his funeral procession was attended by tens of thousands of Peruvian workers whose veneration of the Amauta, or "wise one," bordered on the religious. It was a fitting tribute to a revolutionary who had consistently likened socialism to a kind of spiritual calling.

Many decades later, Mariátegui is still one of Latin America's most original Marxist thinkers. Some would even go so far as to say that the spirit of the regional left remains essentially *Mariáteguiano* — a warm current of humanist Marxism singularly embodied by Mariátegui. But like Antonio Gramsci or Che Guevara, Mariátegui's renown has also come at a cost: a few aphorisms and catchphrases are the sum of what most card-carrying leftists know today about the Latin American revolutionary.

This reduction of his legacy is all the more unfortunate since Latin America needs Mariátegui now more than ever. The ninety-year anniversary of his passing finds the region in the midst of a conservative "Blue Tide" that, when combined with the COVID-19 crisis and looming economic catastrophe, paints an overall grim picture. As ongoing commemorations are dampened by the current political and economic outlook, the Latin American left would do well to rediscover in Mariátegui's revolutionary romanticism an antidote to the fatalism and fear that reactionary forces are peddling throughout the region.

Legacies of the Amauta

“You don’t know who Mariátegui is? He’s the prototype of the new American man.” These were the words of Henri Barbusse, an elder statesman of French communism and acquaintance of Mariátegui. One might add: as the founder of *Amauta*, the journal of socialist polemic and culture that defined an entire generation, general secretary of the Peruvian Socialist Party, and creator of that country’s first trade union federation, Mariátegui was actually the prototype for a new Latin American *revolutionary*. While many interwar socialists had dismissed the region as a “people without history,” Mariátegui’s socialism saw him set out to *make world history* from the margins of the capitalist system.

Many are quick to point out that Mariátegui was not a conventional Marxist. Indeed, Latin American Marxism — a catchall that includes heterodox currents like liberation theology, dependency theory, critical pedagogy, and others — dates back to the late 1920s, in what were the final years of Mariátegui’s short life. It was then, with one ear to local indigenous rebellions, student movements, and labor unrest, and the other attuned to social revolution in Europe, the Peruvian struck on one of his most important ideas: that though Marxism was of European origin, it could *at the same time* be a universal theory of emancipation.

Mariátegui’s lifework can almost be read as a conceit on this one idea: universality for Marxism does not mean the cut-and-paste application of theory, regardless of place and time; instead, to be truly universal — and materialist — an idea must be capable of rethinking and remolding central categories like class struggle and modes of production to fit with the specific realities it encounters. In Mariátegui’s own terms, Marxism was “a compass” and not a fixed route, a tool that could be used by oppressed peoples and nations trying to find their own way.

Many contemporaries balked at what they considered a Eurocentric fantasy — Marxism was, after all, of European mint. Still, Mariátegui seemed to have the last laugh: his political project, joining regional popular movements with Marxist revolutionary doctrine, would eventually become the radical history of twentieth-century Latin America writ large.

South American Heresy

Mariátegui’s political vision starts from a relatively straightforward insight. Throughout its history, capitalism has assumed different forms, whether in the core or periphery. From there, Mariátegui reasoned that if Marxism were to be an effective tool for those oppressed by the capitalist system, it should be spoken in a local vernacular that could reflect regional variations of capitalist social relations. More precisely, writing in early twentieth-century Peru, with its majority indigenous population, minority industrial proletariat, and comprador bourgeoisie, Mariátegui reached the conclusion that being a Marxist in the Andes meant embracing “Indo-American Socialism.”

By now, the Latin American left has elevated debate over “Indo-American socialism” into a near-competitive sport. Broad strokes, Mariátegui’s argument was that the modern doctrine of class struggle would receive a warm reception among the Andean region’s “proto-communist” cultures, and that these indigenous ayllu communities, themselves inchoately socialist, could in turn become the germ seed for a nationwide socialist movement.

That idea ruffled a few feathers. First, and most obviously, because it bucked the so-called stagist model embraced by certain Marxists. These held that all societies should pass through a period of full

capitalist development — with correspondingly “traditional” class relations — before advancing to socialism. But later in life, when Marx corresponded with the Russian populists, he in fact entertained similar ideas to those that Mariátegui arrived to. Both Mariátegui and Marx believed it possible for certain collectivist societies — reconsidered now as extra- rather than pre-capitalist — to ignite nationwide socialist transformation.

Mariátegui’s provocation also skirted the dominant lines of contemporary left debate in Latin America. There, socialism was commonly viewed as a task to be tackled after (bourgeois) economic independence had been accomplished. The Indo-American variant, however, imagined socialism as the alpha and omega of the revolutionary project. Mariátegui’s contention, to this day a lively source of debate in the Andean region, was that the ayllu was a form of community that had *actively* resisted being dissolved into capitalism’s commodified social relations. To play on Nick Estes’s formulation, theirs was a history of the future: an indigenous “disaster socialism” whose communalism had allowed them to survive the end of the world, or, in what must have amounted to the same, conquest and colonial annihilation.

Making Peru Peruvian

These ideas were especially challenging for a country like Peru in the 1920s, where modernity and development were tending to converge on the so-called Indian question — increasingly framed as a matter of public administration and charitable works. Mariátegui’s polemics against this kind of paternalism were especially vitriolic: there would be no national “redemption” of the indigenous, because, in point of fact, the nation as such did not exist.

Nor was he entirely wrong to make such a claim. As hallowed a figure as Simón Bolívar, “the Liberator,” had imagined the nation as a split category: in his namesake country, Bolivian Creoles were constitutionally separated from noncitizen indigenous. Years later and in a similar vein, Bolivian Marxist René Zavaleta Mercado observed that in the Andean context, the word “*patria*,” or fatherland, referred less to a united polity than it did a pitched battle over who belonged and who was excluded. Mariátegui, for his part, was among the first to bring that conflict into plain view: the young Latin American republics born with their backs to the indigenous masses would only become independent nation-states — not neocolonial caste societies — when the indigenous subjects, allied with socialists and the organized working class, engaged in revolutionary activity.

Mariátegui rallied around that cause with a curious battle cry: “Peruanize Peru.” Despite appearances, this was the opposite of an “essentialist” slogan. While elevating the indigenous cause as central to national liberation, Mariátegui railed against Rousseauian visions of the “good Indian” or, as some contemporaries advocated for, a return to the Tawantinsuyu (the Incan Empire). The “Amauta” was emphatic on this point, going so far as to argue that the very idea of cultural purity was a Western import and that those advocating for a naively autochthonous cultural politics were actually practicing a stealthy form of Eurocentrism. Mariátegui took a clear-eyed view on the matter, recognizing that if the indigenous were to become a genuine historical agent, and not the one-dimensional, folksy figure preferred by “indigenistas,” there would have to be a reckoning with national history that in the final instance gave a new meaning to national liberation.

As historians rightly note, Peru’s uniquely conservative independence movement had been more preoccupied with the existential threat of indigenous uprisings than it was with real political and economic independence. The case of the indigenous rebellion leader Túpac Amaru II was emblematic in that sense: a would-be patriot, Túpac Amaru II led a historic struggle in the eighteenth century against the Spanish monarchy’s colonial administration, only to be expunged from the national annals

in the early nineteenth-century Republic. The ostensibly modern nation-state emerging from independence was not only exclusionary of the indigenous, but it was also so clearly drawn along ethnic lines and reinforced by a semicolonial productive structure that one could very well feel dubious about the emancipatory potential of the nation.

Mariátegui's answer to that conundrum was a harbinger of what years later would come to be known as the Third World project: for dependent, peripheral nations, national liberation was inseparable from revolutionizing the entire world system. "Peruanize Peru" did not mean winding the clocks back to a supposedly timeless Amerindian culture, in what would only amount to a mirror image of the colonial nostalgia practiced by the Creole elite. Instead, Mariátegui suggestively imagined arriving at the nation through an internationalist detour, a trajectory where communities pushed outside the boundaries of the bourgeois nation-state (as was the case of the indigenous, but also, for example, the Jewish diaspora) and could reconvene around a set of future-oriented ideas — socialism chief among them — that held out the promise of unblocking the nation's emancipatory potential. Mariátegui's natural point of reference here was the October Revolution, which at that point still held out the promise of a global revolution from the East; but the Peruvian was equally inspired by anti-colonial resistances in India, China, and throughout the Americas.

Myths of the Future

Mariátegui's most cherished and disputed notion was something he called "the myth," a unique fusion of high idealism and political strategy. In modern politics, myths are generally believed to be the natural terrain of the antediluvian right, whereas the Left is supposed to deal in the more materialist "history." Mariátegui turned the screw on that formulation by suggesting that myth — ordinarily associated with static, ritualistic time — could actually be a progressive, history-making device, provided the myth in question was in one way or another "alive."

Mariátegui's thinking on living myths was heavily indebted to Georges Sorel's "myth of the general strike." Both revolutionaries believed that for the masses to be set in motion and mobilized in a revolutionary direction, they had to feel that they were indeed acting on the grand historical stage. And this meant that the future to be conquered had to already be present — or at least imagined, "mythically," to be already present — and within arm's reach: the general strike was a portent of the abolition of private property, and the enduring myth of "Incan communism" prefigured the elimination of (neo)colonialism.

Less widely acknowledged, however, is the extent to which Mariátegui arrived at these ideas by engaging critically with the avatars of fascist thought like Sorel himself, or Giovanni Gentile and Gabriele D'Annunzio. The very thing that appealed to Mariátegui about political myths — the ability to imagine a new beginning for society, to bind constituencies at the level of the imagination, to "think" with the feet of the masses — are all banners that the fascists could have recognized as their own. Argentine scholar Martín Bergel underscores this often-overlooked history to make an important point: at a time when many onetime socialists, like Mussolini, were turning toward fascism, Mariátegui's mystical-revolutionary program remained firmly in the socialist camp. Also, different from some socialists in Europe, Mariátegui took fascism deadly seriously — so much so that he felt it was necessary not only to combat it in the ordinary sense, but to go toe-to-toe with its underlying philosophical and spiritual animus.

Fighting Reaction

Radical new ideas received a warm reception in interwar Latin America. The “*Hora Latinoamericana*” was a time for large-scale, sometimes even continent-wide, social reform. However, as Argentine scholar Federico Finchelstein has argued, the region, with its storied history of militarism, ethnic extermination, and racial hierarchies, was also primed for the latest European export: fascism. In the 1920s and 1930s, the majority of Latin American nations dabbled to varying degrees in some form of integralism or fascist corporatism. Mariátegui in Peru was himself the target of “Judeo-Bolshevik” witch hunts — despite being neither Jewish nor a member of the Communist Party (he was, however, a professed admirer of the more radical wing of Jewish internationalism, and he maintained a deliberate, if tense, relationship with the Third International).

The core of Mariátegui’s pioneering thought on fascism is compiled in a text titled “The Biology of Fascism.” There he outlines a series of considerations that would later become standard fare in fascism studies. Fascism, with its talk of “Year Zero,” had a truly revolutionary component, even if in the last instance it was a conservative revolution tending toward conciliation with the capitalist class and its imperial ambitions. Mariátegui also suggests that the true enemies of the fascists were the socialist and communist left — fascism’s adversarial “modern myth” — and not the liberals whose crisis-ridden institutions it could bend to its advantage. He also observed that fascism was ideologically incoherent and that this was actually part of its power: its irrational exterior betrayed a deeper connection with the mass unconscious and its yearnings for wholeness, identity, and a sense of shared communion. As so many commentators would later announce, it was a politics in thrall to the integrity of the body and the body politic.

This quasi-biological component was further explored in a little-known text from 1927, “The Socio-Economic Aspects of the Health Issue.” Written on the heels of one of the first Pan-American Health Conferences, Mariátegui there celebrates the modernization of government health programs as the entry of the masses into modern politics. In typical fashion, he recognizes the Soviet Union and the Italian fascists as locked in a mortal struggle to define the evolving trend of modern health care. By launching a crusade against infant mortality, creating comprehensive childcare programs, promoting universal literacy, and guaranteed leisure time, the Russians, under the guise of “sanitation,” had effectively put to practice the communist credo of enabling people to pursue their greatest human potential. The fascists, by contrast, had pursued similarly sweeping reforms for demographic purposes — in the name of imperial expansion.

Mariátegui’s remarkable text, written a full fifty years before Michel Foucault’s famous lectures on “biopolitics,” closes on a somber note. In Peru, the health question was only starting to be broached in a “homeopathic” sense: with plenty of fanfare over the impact that scientific advancements could have in urban life, and a deafening silence about its implications for the teeming masses laboring under peonage systems or outright slavery. To extend that sanitary campaign to the latifundist system, Mariátegui went on, would actually mean to put the entire socioeconomic system on trial: raising the possibility of a dignified life for the unfree labor on the Peruvian coast and Sierra region would mean challenging the productive logic of super-exploitation, with its tacit understanding that workers’ deaths were a simple externality in the drive to reduce costs and increase profits. This was a significant insight — a “non-reformist reform” — that Paulo Freire would revive years later with his literacy campaigns, there arguing that worker literacy upended underlying assumptions about the modern division of labor and the presupposition that a manual worker does not need to read. Throughout the region, the oligarchy’s response to these reform campaigns was dictatorship and state-led terror.

A “Heroic Creation” for Our Times

If Mariátegui were alive today, he would most likely feel a sense of vindication and dismay: the COVID-19 crisis has cast a harsh light on Latin American societies, where neoliberal policy still holds sway and the pandemic has potentially deepened its alliance with right-wing reaction. In Mariátegui’s Peru, where over 70 percent of workers survive in the informal economy and the free market principle is literally enshrined in the Constitution as the highest social good, a catastrophic hunger wave and soaring COVID-19 rates have upped the ante on what is elsewhere a choice between the economy or life: in Peru, as in many other Latin American societies, the economy is dictating a demographic policy that can only be described as sacrificial.

Even for a region that has seen a progressive “Bolsonarization” of politics, it is probably too soon to speak of the fascist creep. But Peru, a regional hotbed of conservative evangelicalism, has more recently witnessed the precipitous rise of outsider political forces like the Agricultural People’s Front, or FREPAP. A onetime millenarian evangelical sect, the ethno-nationalist indigenous organization stormed the halls of institutional power in the last congressional elections and, with it, gained a new soapbox to declaim its bewildering mixture of anti-corruption crusades, environmental protection, bigotry toward sexual minorities, and radical anti-women’s rights agenda. All while refraining from speaking out against Peru’s extreme neoliberal system. That “doctrinal equivocation,” as Mariátegui liked to say of fascism’s ideological incoherence, has taken on a new “biological” dimension in the current pandemic as FREPAP leaders denounce gay and transgender peoples as vectors of “evil blood,” and claim that their grievances are a conspiracy seeking to distract from the health crisis.

Were he alive, Mariátegui might ask us to combat obscurantism, nationalist chauvinism, and biological fatalism by drawing attention back to the socioeconomic underpinnings of the health crisis. As he reminds in the final lines of “The Socio-Economic Aspects of the Health Issue,” when one correctly grasps how the health order and the economic order are deeply intertwined, the fight for life itself can begin to take on the hues of a “heroic struggle” for a new social order.

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