

# The Discovery of Marxism: Mariátegui in Italy.

by **Mike Gonzalez** on March 6, 2020

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## An Introduction from the Editors

In October 1919, in a context of escalating repression in Peru, Mariátegui then twenty-five and “with an established reputation within the country’s working class movement, an important body of journalistic work, and some knowledge of Marxism” left for Europe with his friend César Falcón. This journey would play a key role in the formation of his Marxism.

Mariátegui’s Marxism was attentive and responsive to local conditions and relationships. He refused class reductionism, developing a plural conception of the multitude, and afforded a central role to cultural work in the building of socialist power. Much of this he learnt from *Ordine nuovo*, and he would later extend and develop these ideas in his own journal, *Amauta*.

Comrades interested in learning more about Mariátegui can read Daniel Willis’s ‘[Interpreting Mariátegui: Lessons from Peru for the British Left](#)’. Our General Editor Tom Gann [has written about \*In the Red Corner\* for our subscribers](#). A selection of Mariátegui’s works, including his crucial *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*, [is available at marxists.org](#).

[Mike Gonzalez’s \*In the Red Corner\*](#) is the first English-language biography of José Carlos Mariátegui one of Latin America’s most important, innovative, and enduringly relevant, Marxist thinkers. We are very proud to be able to publish this extract, which discusses Mariátegui’s time in Italy and the impact that this time would have on his politics.

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# The Discovery of Marxism: Mariátegui in Europe

## In Revolutionary Italy

It was Italy that provided the intense course in Marxism and socialist politics that would shape him definitively. Mariátegui arrived in Genoa in December 1919. It was the end of the first of Italy's Red Two Years or *Bienio Rosso*, when Italy, and in particular the industrial north of the country, lived through its most intense revolutionary moment.<sup>1</sup> The industrial triangle that embraced Turin, Milan, and Genoa was home to its engineering and automotive industry. The First World War had transformed the area into an engine of dramatic capitalist growth, dominated by the Fiat factories in Turin. Half a million workers lived and worked in the city, many of them recent immigrants from a very different rural Italy.

Italy entered the war in 1915. The importance of the war industries meant that many workers were exempted from military service; its soldiers were overwhelmingly recruited from the peasant population. This reflected the reality of a country whose advanced capitalist sector contrasted dramatically with a rural society where the peasantry (still the majority population) lived in dire poverty in conditions that were often described as semi-feudal, dependent on local landholders, and where landless laborers still survived outside the wages system. In 1916, levels of protest were rising in the countryside, as food prices rose and poverty deepened. In 1917, the opposition to war was growing as the wounded returned to find their families suffering and bereft. In the industrial north, news of the October revolution was received with excitement; a meeting addressed by delegates from the Petrograd Soviet turned into an anti-war protest numbering forty thousand. In August of that year a general strike was met with brute force; fifty thousand troops put down the strike leaving one hundred dead and eight hundred injured. The government then placed the whole of the northern region under military control, ensuring the hostility of both rural and urban populations whose protests against rising prices and shortages had spread from Genoa. The end of the war, in November 1918, produced new protests as the weary and disillusioned troops returned to scarcity, hunger, and the ravages of Spanish flu, which had first arisen in the German prisoner-of-war camps. There was rioting in Genoa, and land seizures throughout the country; both were severely repressed. Then in April 1919, five hundred thousand people joined a general strike called by the official internal commissions within the factories

which were under pressure from their own rank and file.

In the following month two young leaders of the socialist party, Angelo Tasca and Antonio Gramsci, began the publication of the newspaper *Ordine nuovo* (New order). The paper campaigned for the internal factory commissions to be replaced by factory councils elected directly by workers; they were modeled on the Russian soviets and on the new shop stewards' movement that had emerged in Britain during the course of the war. The newspaper was well received in the working class of Turin. The national trade union federation, CGL, had grown to a membership of two million. The metalworkers' union, Metallurgical Workers Employees Federation (Federazione Impiegati Operai Metallurgici, FIOM), had one hundred and thirty-six thousand members. These central events, formed the background to Mariátegui's intense political learning experience, and *Ordine nuovo* would later provide a precedent for his influential journal *Amauta*.

Confindustria, the bosses' organization, reduced the levels of production when the war ended in order to divert their huge wartime profits into financial speculation, but it also watched and waited as the level of grassroots agitation grew in numbers and intensity. They even accepted the eight-hour day. But the immediate beneficiary was the Italian Socialist Party (the PSI), which in the elections in November of that year won 32 percent of the popular vote and 156 parliamentary seats. The Popular Party, a social-christian organization silently backed by the Vatican, whose base was predominantly rural, won 20 percent and 100 seats.

Yet when the factory occupations began again in Genoa, Naples, and Turin, the PSI did not react. *Ordine nuovo*, by contrast, hailed the occupations as a new and potentially revolutionary moment in the class struggle. The factory councils that ran them were indeed the most advanced expression of socialist democracy in Europe at that moment. And their actions coincided with increasingly militant protests outside the cities. But they only coincided; they were not linked organizationally or politically, for the potential political leadership of the PSI, which contained reformist and revolutionary wings, denied them its support or direction. In March 1920, Agnelli, the owner of Fiat, picked a fight over a trivial issue (to do with the method of clocking in) and then locked out his workers. The factory was occupied; after two weeks the occupation was resolved by a series of concessions, but when the employers demanded the dismantling of the factory councils a general strike was called in their defence. The Fiat tactic was repeated by Alfa Romeo in Rome, with the same response. It felt very much as if two kinds of power were confronting each other in Italy. In that situation Gramsci called for the formation of a communist party. Within the PSI there had been support for Gramsci's position, but it was rejected resulting in a victory for the reformists and a defeat for the young revolutionaries who were successfully isolated by the party leadership.

The reality is that the PSI's refusal to act, and the marginalization of *Ordine nuovo*, ensured that the revolutionary opportunity of April and May would be lost. It was an extraordinary moment, or it could have been. But instead of building a politics combining the demands of peasants and workers, as the Bolsheviks had successfully done in Russia, the PSI chose to treat the division between country and city as "natural" and structural. In September five hundred thousand workers occupied their factories, led by the rank and file factory commissions now under almost entirely anarchist leadership, whose scorn for the socialists' parliamentary fixation had presumably gained them a great deal of credibility and enabled them to "scoop up popular disappointment and frustration"<sup>2</sup>. This prompted Lenin's famous, but rather unfair question, "was there not a single communist in the occupations?" The reaction of the Socialist Party (PSI) and the Confederazione Generale del Lavoro (CGL) confirmed their prejudices; the official organizations were more frightened by this mass militancy and the emergence of a new kind of power from below than by the actions of the State. Their concerns above all were control and the assurance of the 156 parliamentary seats they had won in the previous year.

Against that background, the factories returned to work in September 1920. *Ordine nuovo* had fallen apart, as both Togliatti and Tasca had broke away to form a left wing within the maximalists and to devote their energies to a workers' campaign against sending troops to Albania.

In January of 1921 the PSI congress met at the Tuscan port of Livorno (Leghorn in English). Mariátegui was in attendance as a correspondent for *El tiempo*. The conference was historic. Its various factions ranged between right wing reformists, centrists, and the so-called "maximalists," led by Bordiga, who, in response to the pressure from the Comintern, were arguing for the creation of a communist party. Gramsci had advocated its creation a year earlier, but in the very different circumstances of the factory occupations when *Ordine nuovo* enjoyed real authority among the revolutionary workers. The group had never had the support of either wing of the PSI, however. The reformist leadership was more concerned, as Mariátegui would later put it, with the restoration of "normality," while Bordiga, the leader of the 'maximalists,' took an abstentionist position. In reality both were standing back from the struggle. By the time of Livorno, Gramsci was "an isolated and marginal figure"<sup>3</sup>. The maximalists split from the party to form the PCI (Communist Party of Italy). Gramsci had little role to play, and did not speak at the conference, much to Mariátegui's surprise.

Mariátegui's time in Italy was seminal in his development as a socialist and a Marxist. Yet curiously there was little in his early writing as Juan Croniqueur<sup>4</sup> to suggest any specific interest in Italy. The exception was a fascination with the Romantic reactionary

Gabriele D'Annunzio. He was probably introduced to the poet by his friend and colleague at *Colónida*, Abraham Valdelomar, who had spent a year in Italy and met D'Annunzio there. While the extravagance of D'Annunzio did not connect very directly with a Mariátegui still locked in his melancholy, decadent moment, he did resonate later with the Peruvian's increasing fascination with "men of action." This vision of D'Annunzio corresponded to the image of a soldier of fortune, a *condottiero*, seizing Fiume in the name of the Italian nation. It would make him a hero of the fascist movement, but it would seem that it was only in Italy that José Carlos understood the connection and changed his views. What might have seemed at a distance like epic adventurism looked very different in the face of the realities of the First World War.

“ D'Annunzio's adventure, for example, stripped of its lyrical qualities, is clearly the adventure of a reactionary and militarist mentality. It amounts to a rebellion of the military power against the civil power.”<sup>5</sup>

Mariátegui was clearly surprised by what he encountered in Italy, politically and culturally. The Letters from Italy (*Cartas de Italia*), a collection of his brief dispatches to Lima, are descriptive yet restrained. The real analysis of his trip and its implications came later, in his lectures to the Universidad Popular and the articles in *The contemporary scene*, or *La escena contemporánea*. He was an avid reader of the Italian press, and especially the official paper of the PSI *Avanti!* and of Gramsci's *Ordine nuovo*. Rouillon and others stress that he was writing less because he was reading and studying — and there is no doubt about the intensity of his learning process.

He arrived in a Europe still dealing with the ravages of war and the repercussions of the first socialist revolution. For Mariátegui it was a logical decision to go to Italy, the European country which was experiencing a revolutionary upsurge and in which the social and economic conditions bore some close resemblance to Russia—a modern and burgeoning capitalist sector with large concentrations of workers coexisting with a rural world where precapitalist relations still prevailed. A year earlier he might perhaps have gone to Germany.

There is a very moving article in *Letters from Italy* which powerfully expresses his response to the impact of war in Italy. "The House of the War Blind" describes a grand house near where he was living in Rome that was a center for the war blind:

“ People will generally only know the optimistic version of the tragedy of these blind men, a version created for universal consumption.... This version says that the war blind are a legion of glorious invalids, proud of their medals, ribbons and decorations, at ease with their sacrifice, proud of their victories and

resigned to their unfortunate fate.... But they surely will not even remember that they are heroic sons of their country and of civilisation. And just as they don't care about the view over Rome, or the spring or the Tusculum or Cicero they're not interested in their glory or its merits. No literature can console them. The scenario painted for the tourists doesn't exist for them. The vision that they retain in their useless eyes is the vision of the terrible trenches.<sup>6</sup>

In political terms he describes, very acutely, the situation of an Italian socialism that summarized many of the contradictions of Second International Marxism. If he expected to find a postwar return to Marxism there, he was deeply disappointed. It was, in a real sense, the first casualty. Its mechanical interpretation of Marx, and the assurance that socialism would emerge from the process of capitalist development itself, lay under the ruins of Ypres and Paeschendale. Italy showed very clearly that war was a time of bonanza for the wealthy, as the Italian engineering industry multiplied its profits ten times over. At the same time, news must have reached him as soon as he arrived in Genoa of the food riots and violent confrontations on the land in northern Italy.

From Genoa he moved straight to Turin to meet with the PSI. What he found must have generated further confusion. The PSI had adopted an ambivalent position at the start of the war, neither collaborationist nor abstentionist. Benito Mussolini, one of its leaders and the editor of its newspaper, had pressed for involvement, arguing that intervention in the war would "accelerate the revolutionary process." The end of the war "was a revolutionary and socialist moment," reflected in the high level of support in the first postwar election for the PSI. The petty bourgeoisie enraged by the outcome of the war for Italy and bitterly hostile to the working class found an echo in fascism. Mussolini was able to "offer an organization that responded to their state of mind and their fears." But Mariátegui is adamant—Mussolini was the creation of fascism, not its ideologue.<sup>7</sup>

In Italy he was struck, as he could not fail to be in that dramatic year of the *Bienio Rosso*, by the weight of the working-class movement in Italian politics. But the political party that claimed to represent that working class, the Socialist Party (PSI), had displayed a permanent ambivalence in the course of the war. Internally divided between interventionists and abstentionists, the party (like the Vatican) preferred to maintain a discreet silence once Italy entered the war in 1915. But both wings maintained a presence within the party—the war faction led by the ex-editor of their newspaper *Avanti*, Benito Mussolini, until he left the PSI and founded his own newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*, the mouthpiece of fascism, the latter by a group of liberal intellectuals represented by Nitti. The disagreement over the war produced a split, essentially between the politics of the Second International, whose member organizations supported the war; and the main leadership group who, in 1917, supported the Third International in support of the

Russian Revolution and indeed affiliated the party to it. It was curious, if not contradictory, that a party that had formally maintained neutrality in the war, should now support revolution. It was above all a response to the enormous popularity of the Russian revolution among the workers who were the mainstay of the party, and a recognition of the deep antiwar feeling that the reality of war at home as well as in the trenches had generated within the working class. But it remained a formal support—at least until 1921, when the Comintern's Twenty-One Conditions set out the criteria for remaining within the International. The PSI formally agreed to the conditions, but laid down its own caveats and reservations, which the International did not accept. The maximalist current, uncompromising supporters of the International, called for abstention from the electoral process and the immediate creation of a separate communist party.

In his early writings on the Italian political process<sup>8</sup>, Mariátegui resists generalities and, characteristically, carefully analyzes the specifics of the Italian situation. As we shall see, however, he certainly found important parallels to develop between Italy and elements of the Peruvian situation. Both Nitti and Giolitti, liberal leaders of the PSI, attempted to hold to an ambiguous neutrality. In the conflictive and tense conditions of the *Bienio*, they tried to hold a fine line between the nationalists in their ranks and the socialists, satisfying neither. The rising clamour from an emerging fascist movement, many of whose members were returning ex-soldiers, was matched by the extraordinary levels of working-class militancy and resistance in 1920. In early 1921, Mariátegui still argued that the essential antipathy to war of the Italian people would stop fascism in its tracks. His optimism soon changed to alarm, and in a series of perceptive pieces later published in *The contemporary scene* he provided a profound and comprehensive analysis of the fascist phenomenon, together with a withering critique of the failure of reformism, and indeed of Italian socialism in general, to recognize its impact in time:

“ Fascism arose at a moment when revolution seemed imminent, in an atmosphere of agitation, violence, demagoguery, and delirium created by the war, intensified by the postwar crisis, excited by the Russian Revolution. In this tempestuous moment, charged with electricity and tragedy, their nerves and weapons were steeled, and they absorbed the energy, the exhilaration and the spirit of the moment. Fascism, drawing together these elements, is a movement, a proseletysing current.”<sup>9</sup>

By June he was clear as to what was involved, as the PSI remained in government and supported its initiatives. “Fascism (he says) represents an offensive by the bourgeois classes against the rise of the working class.”<sup>10</sup> The source of the weakness of the state is

the nature of Italy itself. Its unification, less than a century old, was no guarantee of unity. The city-states of history still remained, in many cases, virtually autonomous, and regional differences remained huge—politically, socially, and economically. Italy was still, in a real sense, a federal state.

But the rise of fascism in Italy was a manifestation for Mariátegui of a much deeper crisis that was not restricted to Italy. The liberal intellectuals of Italy, like those who supported the Wilsonian outcome to war, imagined a return to a bourgeois normality. But the war was not a mere interruption in the course of capitalism's inexorable progress from which socialism would emerge like a phoenix from the ashes. The very notion of progress, what he called the "myth of progress," lay in ruins scattered around the trenches of Europe. As an ideology it could not respond to or explain the industrialization of war, the scale of death and destruction, nor the contradiction at its very heart illustrated by the rocketing profits of the Italian war industry. Italy was erupting in class conflict in the factories and on the land; the state had no means of resolving the class struggle, and worst of all, the politicians who enjoyed the mass support of workers withdrew from leadership. This crisis, this decadence of the bourgeois order, would be the subject of Mariátegui's lectures at the People's University and of his first published work, the articles collected in *The contemporary scene*.

*Ordine nuovo* was an inspiration for Mariátegui during his European trip and later. In his article on the Italian press<sup>11</sup>, he develops a theme he drew from his conversations with Gonzalez Prada, who had argued that a press that simply provides information, in a context of intensifying class struggle, is playing a reactionary role; its impartiality is a fraud. Here he brought to bear the experience of *La razón*, where information gave way to agitation and solidarity. In his trips to Rome, starting in early 1920, Mariátegui met regularly with members of Gramsci's group<sup>12</sup>. After falling ill in Rome for four months, he and his group of friends (Falcón, Roe, Maquiavelo) returned to Turin and met with Togliatti, Terracini, and Tasca, all three still members of the *Ordine nuovo* group, and went in to some of the occupied factories. By this time the abstention of the PSI had produced divisions within the occupations and a shift in the leadership of the trade unions towards anarchism.<sup>13</sup> There was also an internal debate among the PSI left, with Gramsci arguing for maintaining a current within the PSI and others, including Togliatti and the others, pressing towards Bordiga's demand for the immediate creation of a separate communist party. As we know this finally happened at Livorno in January 1921, but in circumstances in which the *Ordine nuovo* group had split and Gramsci was marginalized. The *Ordine nuovo* that re-emerged later that year as the party's organ was not the paper it had once been. The emphasis on the factory councils as the engines of revolution diminished and the paper became much closer to an organ of the Comintern, a line which Gramsci approved though he was opposed to the downgrading of the



councils.

By now the role played by both the PSI leadership and the CGL was becoming clear. Fascism was becoming stronger and more visible as it pulled in frustrated ex-soldiers around an ideology of reactionary nationalism. For José Carlos, the weakness of the communist party was a pressing and obvious problem. Where *Ordine nuovo* had spoken with the voice of the militant minority, its weakness in terms of party politics had undermined that connection, and José Carlos commented on the absence within the group of a rooted and experienced leadership. By now Togliatti and the others had moved to a different arena too. In April 1922, the four Peruvian friends formed the first cell of the Peruvian Communist Party. There is no evidence that it led to setting up any organizational forms; it would seem more probable that it was a symbolic gesture of support for *Ordine nuovo*. It was also a sign of the political distance that Mariátegui in particular had traveled in Europe. But others in the group may have seen it as a more serious commitment to creating a party. In the following year, after their return to Peru, César Falcón entered into a very angry correspondence with his old friend. Falcón was adamant that it was the right time to found the party; Mariátegui disagreed and continued to resist any premature formation of a communist party that would distance committed socialists from the wider movement.<sup>14</sup> In May 1922, José Carlos decided to return to Peru, though he would do so over seven months, visiting a number of European cities en route except, to his regret, Moscow.

## Consequences

There is general agreement that Europe changed Mariátegui permanently, and that his intense Italian experience laid the foundations of his Marxism. But, despite his famous modest appraisal of his time there, when he had acquired “a few ideas” the reality is that he had embarked on a creative journey. Learning from Europe, he saw at a very early stage, did not mean reproducing the European experience. There were general lessons about organization—and a number of warnings; there was the great debate that divided the left and the workers’ movement internationally—between reform and revolution—which, in the absence of socialist organization had not arisen within Peru; there was the matter of the role of intellectuals and of the press; there was the issue of the political role of culture; there was the question of the party. And central to them all was his understanding of Marxism.

In Italy he had seen the potential power of an organized and militant working-class movement, and the contribution of a revolutionary newspaper to its development. Yet in three years or less the counter-revolution had taken the central role on the historical

stage. It was critical to understand how that had been possible, what forces or failures had undermined the factory council movement and allowed the bombastic, strutting Mussolini to steal leadership of a mass movement. Mariátegui's analysis is subtle and profound; his method undoubtedly learned from Gramsci's *Ordine nuovo*. He would elaborate the lessons learned in Italy throughout the rest of his short life, but present them first in his lectures at the Universidad Popular.

The bankruptcy of reform in the wake of war became clear as he observed the conduct of the PSI, which was as he put it, "theoretically revolutionary but reformist in practice." The party had enjoyed the support of a significant part of the Italian working class; at the time of the November 1919 elections it had over two hundred thousand members. The main trade union federation, which it dominated, had two million members. Yet it had seen them only as voters, and the leadership's role to represent them at the highest levels of the state—to negotiate with the state on their behalf. Their revolutionary credentials went no further than a cautious socialist language and a wholly abstract support for the Russian revolution. This had a great deal to do with the internal life of the party, and the maintenance of a balance between internal factions covering the spectrum from left to right. It had very little to do with understanding the implications of 1917. And it certainly had nothing to do with the concept of workers' power enshrined in the soviets and the factory councils. Thus, when in 1921, the Comintern insisted on the Twenty-One Conditions for membership to become a communist party, the PSI leadership hesitated and tried to insist on its reservations, specifically on the question of a new party. The refusal of the Comintern to consider their objections and Lenin's controversial recognition of the Turin group, made the Livorno split inevitable.

There was no doubt that the occupation of the factories represented a revolutionary moment; Mariátegui reaffirms that a number of times. Neither was there any question in his mind of the crisis of democracy—that is liberal democracy—itsself. Yet he appears to retain a degree of confidence that the Italian working class, despite the betrayal by its leadership and the paralyzing uncertainty of the communists, still had the capacity and the will to resist fascism. That stemmed in part from his understanding of fascism itself, and in part from the conviction that the crisis of liberal democracy leaves socialism as the only alternative.

What constitutes the moment or the impulse that transforms economic struggles into a movement for a new and different future? And who is the historic subject of that transitional moment? At an early stage Mariátegui defined that new subject as the "multitude." Given the resurgence of the term in the writings of Hardt and Negri as a shifting and inchoate force defined by its diversity and its restless shifts in space, it is important to distinguish Mariátegui's use of the term, and to recognize that it proposed a different or an alternative subject to the "proletariat" that was the subject of European

a different or an alternative subject to the proletariat that was the subject of European Marxism's understanding of revolution. In Italy, Gramsci's response in *Ordine nuovo* to the failures of the August 1919 mobilizations was to argue that the key was "a lack of preparation." Mariátegui repeats that conclusion in regard to Italy but addresses the problem more generally. "Preparation," in the case of Peru, specifically involved creating an organ of information between the Peruvian working class and the international proletariat, developing the organic intellectuals that Gramsci also discussed at length, and creating "the instruments of popular culture."<sup>15</sup> But what did Mariátegui mean by these "instruments"? It is much more than a vanguard party. In fact, he returned again and again to the affirmation that the vanguard of the movement must arise from within it, that thought emerges from practice, from life, and not the reverse. This idea was elaborated by the Italian Marxist Antonio Labriola, who was not only a key figure in Gramsci's development but who also coined the notion of Marxism as the *philosophy of praxis* which was fundamental for both Mariátegui and Gramsci<sup>16</sup>.

It seems likely, on reflection, that two things had had a major impact on the Peruvian. The first was the abject failure of the reformists to *lead* their working-class supporters. On the contrary, they had allowed themselves to be led by bourgeois ideology and the rules of bourgeois state institutions, while using the language of socialism. Exposed in their ineptitude, it was urgent that the communists, the radicals, assume the leadership of the whole movement remembering as José Carlos said, that "a variety of tendencies and a range of ideological nuances are inevitable in that great human legion called the proletariat."<sup>17</sup>

But within what he called the multitude, or sometimes the masses, there was a recognition of the enormous diversity of the non-bourgeoisie, which in the Peruvian case must embrace peasants, artisans, agricultural workers not yet involved in the wages system, and Indigenous communities. They were the collective subject of revolution. In the Italian case it didn't escape Mariátegui's notice that while the revolutionary crisis and the instances of insurrection involved peasants and agricultural workers, the PSI and the left generally had neglected and ignored them, essentially leaving them to the Popular Party. Gramsci's background (as a Sardinian) as well as his political sensibilities (formed at an earlier stage by an anarchism which did address rural struggles) gave him the perspective to see that a revolution that involved only the urban proletariat would be stillborn. In the Red Two Years the struggles of city and countryside often coincided in their content and in their common enemy. Yet the PSI did not look for ways to link, let alone coordinate those struggles, to provide shared demands, in the way the Lenin and the Bolsheviks had. The parallels between what Gramsci described as "the southern question" and the necessity that a revolutionary movement everywhere, including Peru, must embrace and include those in struggle against the capitalist system outside the factories—on the land, in the communities and neighborhoods, among women, among

factories — on the land, in the communities and neighborhoods, among women, among the oppressed generally, and in the case of Peru, the Indigenous communities, could not be clearer.

At the heart of his analysis was the notion of crisis. The economic consequences of the end of war, from the point of view of the masses, were catastrophic. The decline in industrial production meant a sharp rise in unemployment and a battle over wages now that the necessity for full production was less pressing than the reestablishment of control over the the labor process. In Italy, as in Britain, war production had paradoxically produced new forms of rank and file organization in the factories. In the countryside war reduced the numbers of workers and redirected production towards sustaining the armies in the field— although the Italian government had refused to send food to prisoners of war on the curious grounds that it would make them more likely to desert. But the rising price of food had also encouraged the large landowners to grab peasant land to extend production, which led to violent confrontations throughout the country. As Mariátegui later argued, the crisis was not simply economic but social and ideological; and the main casualty was the bourgeois myth of progress. That central ideological column that had bound together liberals and social democrats in the prewar years now lay in ruins. The letters to and from the front told the same story—of the wealthy bourgeoisie living well and continuing their lives<sup>18</sup>, while at home and at the front the soldiers and their families experienced pain, hunger and a deepening disillusionment.

What he had seen in Europe made very clear that liberal democracy was in its death throes. Its promise, its myth of the relentless development of productive forces, had been exposed in the first great industrial war. Social democracy and the politics of reform had exposed their complicity in the lie and revealed as they did so that capitalism had no inherent commitment to the full development of humankind. As Mariátegui writes:

“ The defenders of democracy do not want to recognize that it is outdated and exhausted as an idea but only as an organism. What these politicians are defending is the transient form rather than the enduring principle. The word democracy no longer serves to designate an abstract idea of pure democracy, but rather to refer to the liberal democratic bourgeois state. The democracy of today’s democrats is capitalist democracy. It is democracy as form not democracy as idea. And that democracy is in decline and decay. Parliament is the organ, and democracy is the heart. And parliament has ceased to respond to its objectives and has lost its authority and its democratic function. Democracy is dying of heart failure.<sup>19</sup>

In the same essay he suggests that the alternatives that both reaction and revolution offer are “dictatorial.” In the essay itself, it is not clear whether he uses the term in a critical sense. But in his discussion more generally of the Italian experience he emphasized the democratic organization of workers’ power, with the soviet and the factory councils as examples.

In the fervid atmosphere of Europe after 1917, the Russian example— unsurprisingly— became the reference point, and the Bolshevik party the model of political organization. But Germany had shown that even in the most advanced industrial democracy, with its mass socialist party, its proliferation of trade unions and workers’ cultural associations, socialist ideas had been captured by the Second International, and the extraordinary leaders of the Bavarian Soviet had not developed their project to the point where the German working class could be moved to take power. The internal divisions were too deep, the weight of social democracy and the fear of a workers’ insurrection too great. He wrote in “Ebert and Social Democracy”<sup>20</sup>

“Ebert represents a whole epoch in German social democracy, the epoch of the development and decline of the Second International. In a capitalist regime reaching its fulfillment, the workers’ organizations solely concerned themselves with material gains. The proletariat used the power of its unions and its votes to win immediate benefits from the bourgeoisie. In France and elsewhere there emerged a revolutionary trade unionism in a reaction against this tame, parliamentary socialism. The social movement in Germany has placed itself firmly within the bourgeois state in a bourgeois order.”<sup>21</sup>

The opportunism of social democracy had “made the bureaucracy spiritually and intellectually incapable of fulfilling the tasks of revolution.”

The failure of the socialist offensive in Italy and Germany, therefore, was due in large part to the absence of a solid revolutionary elite. The leading cadres of Italian socialism were neither revolutionary nor reformist, like those of German social democracy. The communist nucleus consisted of young people with very little influence among the masses. The quantity required by the revolution was there; the quality was not, as yet. The new elites must emerge from the socialist ranks.

Mariátegui’s use of the term “elite” grates a twenty-first century audience; but it was also used by Gramsci to refer to the revolutionary vanguard—the leadership of the revolution that is yet to be “prepared.”

In Italy, Mariátegui encountered Marxism made flesh as an idea and a practice

in Italy, Mariátegui encountered Marxism made flesh as an idea and a practice informing living processes. Gramsci, especially in his understanding of the relationship between an industrial working class and a poor peasantry, enriched the idea of the revolutionary subject. The vacillations of the Socialist Party were a reminder of the persistence of “the muck of ages” and its capacity to undermine the revolutionary impulse. During his lengthy journey home, José Carlos must have sensed the urgency of the revolutionary moment; he had, after all, glimpsed the alternative in an emerging fascism menacing in its intent.

*In the Red Corner: The Marxism of José Carlos Mariátegui* by Mike Gonzalez is published by Haymarket Books.

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1. For an account of this period see Paolo Spriano, *The occupation of the factories* (Pluto Press, London, 1975), Gwyn A. Williams, *Proletarian Order: Antonio Gramsci, factory councils and the origins of communism in Italy, 1911–21* (Pluto Press, London, 1975). ↩
  2. Gwyn A. Williams introduction to Spriano, *The occupation of the factories* ↩
  3. Williams introduction to Spriano, *The occupation of the factories* ↩
  4. [NS note:] Mariátegui used the pseudonym Juan Croniqueur from the age of fifteen, firstly as a court and parliamentary reporter and then also as a racing correspondent for *Turf* and a writer for the women’s magazine *Lulu*. “Croniqueur” also wrote melancholy poetry and was part of avant-garde circles although Mariátegui’s impoverished background set him apart from “the bored young scions of Lima’s aristocracy” who comprised much of this group. See, *In The Red Corner*, pp. 24–5 and 34–8. ↩
  5. Antonio Melis, *Leyendo Mariátegui* (Lima: Amaita). ↩
  6. José Carlos Mariátegui, *El alma matinal* (Lima: Amauta, 1950). ↩
  7. José Carlos Mariátegui, “Mussolini and Fascism” in *La escena contemporánea*, (Lima: Amauta, 1925). ↩
  8. José Carlos Mariátegui, “The Forces of Socialism in Italy”, in *Cartas de Italia*, (Lima: Amauta, 1969). ↩
  9. Mariátegui, “Mussolini and Fascism”. ↩
  10. José Carlos Mariátegui, “Scenes from a Civil War”, in *Cartas de Italia*. ↩
  11. José Carlos Mariátegui, “The Italian Press”, in *Cartas de Italia*. ↩

12. Guillermo Rouillon, *Bio-Bibliografía de José Carlos Mariátegui*, (Lima, 1963). ↩
13. See Steven Hirsch, “Anarcho-syndicalism in Peru, 1905–1930” available at <https://libcom.org/library/anarcho-syndicalism-peru-1905-1930-steven-hirsch> ↩
14. Fernanda Beigel, “Una mirada sobre otra: el Gramsci que conoció Mariátegui”, in *Revista Estudos de Sociologia*, (2005), available at <https://periodicos.fclar.unesp.br/estudos/article/view/113> ↩
15. José Carlos Mariátegui, *Historia de la Crisis Mundial* (Lima: Amauta, 1959). ↩
16. See *In the Red Corner*, Chapter 10. ↩
17. Mariátegui, *Cartas de Italia*. ↩
18. See V. Mosler on Germany in H. Barekat and M. Gonzalez, *Arms and the People* (London: Pluto Press, 2013). ↩
19. José Carlos Mariátegui, “The Crisis of Democracy” in *El Alma matinal*. ↩
20. Mariátegui, *La escena contemporánea* ↩
21. Mariátegui, *La escena contemporánea* ↩

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## author

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