

Mariátegui and the Andean revolutionarism

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Rereading the classics in the social sciences, one begins to notice that even authors who analyze social reality from the perspective of class struggle tend to interpret societies as organic “wholes,” subject to rules of analysis that reinforce the criteria of unity and homogeneity through which human events are usually evaluated. The same is true when, as often occurs in the study of postcolonial societies, a historical analysis ignores the deep ethnic and racial divisions that mark political life in those nations.

As I look into the discourse surrounding the nation—which, because it deals with the collective organization of the people, is the most important discourse in the enlightened construction of modernity—I will emphasize that, when critics talk about imagining the nation, they rarely

take the complex relationship between nation and ethnicity into account as they should. In other words, this chapter asks whether an explanation of the nation also calls for an ethnic component, or whether the nation itself, unmoored from any situation predating its own organization, is the sole source of nationalism. To my way of understanding, the nation can only be theorized in strict relationship with the theme of ethnicity, which is linked to profound cultural conflicts that influential modern essays have ignored. For Benedict Anderson (1983), the origin of the nation lies in a “print-capitalist” nationalism that emerged from the sphere of the educated elite. This nationalism swallows up ethnic differences with a Eurocentric vision that overlooks or minimizes local conflicts. To counteract this view of things, in this essay I will examine how José Carlos Mariátegui of Peru, a superlative intellectual and analyst of Latin American culture, could not separate the study of modernity from the cultural conflict generated by ethnic identities that, given their archaic character, obstructed and called into question the forward progress of the official nation.

The “persistence of ‘then’ within ‘now,’” the simultaneous presence of the non-modern in the historical time of modernity, can be seen in the stubborn presence of ethnic identities as described in the essays of Mariátegui from the early twentieth century. These identities, uncomfortably grafted onto the project of Latin American nation-building, reveal notable exceptions among intellectuals—writers who took a critical view of the triumphal liberal per-

spective on history, who were more cautious than most in fathoming the perilous formation of our nations.

Wishing to update the social criticism of Mariátegui, another aim of this essay is to bring him into the present. Thus, I analyze how he linked the theme of ethnicity to the concepts of “subalternity,” and “the people.” I feel that Mariátegui can help us reflect on themes that form part of the discussion about the nature and composition of the most recent social movements.

Mariátegui and the Case of Peru

In the case of the Andes, states were built before any true nations had been organized (Favre, 1998). Compared with the independence movement that took place in Mexico, Peru became independent in 1821 with insufficient support from the masses. Nor did it have enough support to settle accounts with its colonial past. On top of this frustration, some years later there came Peru’s military defeat in 1879, the occupation of a portion of its national territory by Chile, and economic collapse. With all this background, it is clear that Peru was not a nation, and that the project of building a republic had failed. At the close of the nineteenth century, according to historian and essayist Alberto Flores Galindo (1989, p. 5), there was no telling what the social reality of Peru was. Indeed, after a full century, Peru had still not been able to resolve the cultural conflict between elites and the popular classes, and the differences that the colonial structure had established in politics, religion, ethnicity, and gender had only grown more pro-

found. In broad outline, Peruvian society was divided between a rich and privileged dominant class of European origin, and a broad, poor popular sector composed of indigenous people, the descendents of enslaved Africans who had been brought from West Africa to Peru in the seventeenth-century, and Chinese laborers who worked in the nineteenth-century guano mines. An intellectual precursor of José Carlos Mariátegui, the anarchist Manuel González Prada, called nineteenth-century Peru a country “of gentlemen and of servants.”

408 Men of letters—*letrados*—such as the prototypical traditional intellectuals Víctor Andrés Belaúnde and Francisco García Calderón Rey presented their own social class, the early twentieth-century Peruvian oligarchy, with a vision of the country that lacked any kind of collective project.

Writing from Paris, García Calderón replicated the theoretician’s practice of separating ideas from their historical context. Thus, his writing bore the same anti-Yankee stamp that Uruguayan writer José Enrique Rodó had displayed in his critique of North American imperialism, written in 1900, when the North had just begun to encroach on Latin America. Rodó’s “Arielismo,” whose sphere of influence included García Calderón, formed part of that long *letrado* tradition that I have described above, in which writers from El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega through Sarmiento and beyond forged a “national culture,” which, when combined with the Arielismo of the late nineteenth-century, became a critique of capitalist materialism. These critiques, which

never completely broke with the romantic liberalism of that era, were contradicted by a group of Peruvian writers, and in particular by the ideas of José Carlos Mariátegui.

Unlike Francisco García Calderón, Mariátegui did not reflect on society “from” Paris, but rather “from” Lima. For the place where Mariátegui elaborated and enunciated his ideas was not simply coincidental; it was, to the contrary, consubstantial with the Peruvian Marxist’s two reasons for parting ways with Arielismo, a philosophy rooted in an exclusively culturalist analysis of the problems of Spanish America and of Peru in particular.

In the first place, Mariátegui’s thinking was no longer just an imitation of European views. By thinking about the reality of Peru from within the very heart of the colonial structure, Mariátegui could see the colonial condition from “outside” the ways of thinking cultivated in Europe and the United States, though he later said that he had received his best intellectual training in Europe. One result of his geopolitical location was an insistence that any analysis of reality had to be grounded in the material and political economic history of the moment, quite apart from all philosophical abstractions. When he thus revealed the economic basis for neocolonialism, he put his finger right on the problem—and doing that touched a raw nerve: Peru was not, and would never become, a modern European society, because the very origins of its modernity was burdened with a different sort of colonial structure, with a socio-economic structure that exhibited “the contemporaneity of the

non-contemporaneous” that called into question the linear and teleological flow of history.

Thinking against the grain about the meaning of history was the basic change that Mariátegui introduced into his reading of the realities of Latin America. The evolutionary meaning of history that Hegel had set out—the notion that the world is all governed by the same historical time, with Europe at the center of the movement of history—had a powerful influence on European Marxism. In contrast, the school of progressive and “organic” intellectuals from the South—Antonio Gramsci is their most important thinker—creatively questioned Hegel’s logocentrism. This was the transformative school of Marxism to which

410 Mariátegui belonged. He began the new Latin American tradition of complementing a reading of reality in the old class-structure terms (aristocracy, bourgeoisie, proletariat) with a novel understanding of material inequalities, contextualized in space and time.

Secondly, his work helped put an end to the culture fetishism into which Eurocentric theoreticians had largely fallen in Peru. By turning their full attention to cultural matters, they had forgotten the socioeconomic basics that should condition any reading of reality. A heterodox Marxist in the fullest sense of the term, Mariátegui was the first to undertake a rigorous analysis of Latin American society. In the 1920s, when Mariátegui was elaborating his thesis about Marxism as a myth for our times, the Mexican thinker José Vasconcelos, along with other important Latin American intellectuals, was using the concept of *indi-*

genismo to explain the future of Latin America. Vasconcelos and the others did this based on understandings that had little to do with the actual cultural conflicts in which our countries were immersed. It was different with Mariátegui. His *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* (1928, trans., *Seven interpretive essays on Peruvian reality*, 1971) gave an illuminating perspective on the situation of indigenous people in the real economic, political, and historical context of the Andes.

Other factors made Mariátegui's thinking even more relevant, especially his plan of applying the principles of historical materialism flexibly so that they could take root in the socioeconomics of history and culture without falling into economic determinism.

411

Two currents of revolutionary thought from the early 1900s help explain Mariátegui's heterodox Marxism: first, Italian Marxism, to which he had been exposed during his years in Italy through his relationship with the Communist Party and its newspaper, *L'Ordine Nuovo*; second, through the ideas of Georges Sorel, which deeply influenced him. In the confluence of these two European currents of thought, Mariátegui created his own messianic views, uniting rationality and myth.

Mariátegui ended up in Italy from 1920 to 1923 after being sent into exile by the Augusto Leguía dictatorship. While writing a column, "Letters from Italy," for the Lima newspaper *El Tiempo* during these years, he attended the famous 1921 Livorno Congress of the Italian Socialist Party, which led to the founding of the Communist Party of It-

aly under Antonio Gramsci, a founding editor of *L'Ordine Nuovo*. There is no indication, however, that Mariátegui came into contact with Gramsci's thinking during his relatively long stay in Italy. Though it is generally assumed that Mariátegui had access to Gramsci's ideas when he undertook his analysis of Peruvian reality, nothing in the records can prove a direct influence of Gramsci on him. It seems he was slightly acquainted with Gramsci, but he does not cite him—unlike other Italian writers, especially Benedetto Croce and Piero Gobetti, whom he does quote regularly.

412 The links between Mariátegui and Gramsci are undeniable. Indeed, Gramsci's new approaches to Marx were in the air of Italian culture, and Mariátegui probably discovered them through the works of Piero Gobetti, who analyzed the function of the economy in the creation of a new political order. But his assimilation of Gobetti's historical criticism should not make us lose sight of the fact that Mariátegui always thought "from" Peru. Thus, by connecting the indigenous problem with the problem of land and the contemporaneity of distinct cultures, Mariátegui's criticism discovered in the agrarian structure of Peru the roots of the nation's backwardness and the reasons why the indigenous masses were excluded from political and cultural life. Hence his understanding that, by identifying the Indian question with the land question, he had discovered the crux of a problem that only a socialist revolution could resolve. However, the fact that linked Mariátegui to the *indigenista* movement, and that distanced him from Marxist orthodoxy, what his political (rather than doctrinaire) per-

spective on the confluence between the “modern” workers’ movement and the peasantry. Simultaneously with Gramsci, Mariátegui understood that the peasant question was, above all, an indigenous question (Aricó, 1980, p. xi-lvi). He was greatly helped in this by his knowledge of and interest in other Peruvian writers who were dedicated to the analysis of *indigenismo*. It was during his research, mediated by his reading of the works of Castro Pozo, Uriel García, and most importantly Luis E. Valcárcel, that Mariátegui got into the rural world of Peru. As a good organic intellectual, Mariátegui connected his reading with his publication of *Amauta*, a journal that helped link the intellectuals of coastal Peru, influenced by the urban workers’ movement, Marxist socialism, and other European currents of thought, with the intellectuals of Cusco, who represented the *indigenista* movement.

413

It is worth looking more deeply into the similarities between Gramsci and Mariátegui, particularly in regard to the spatial nature of their thought. On the level of methodology, both differed from other *letrados* in that they insisted on taking political economy into account while being careful not to fall into orthodox Marxist determinism, with its rigid separation between “base” and “superstructure.” Both Gramsci’s essay “Some Aspects of the Southern Question” and Mariátegui’s *Siete ensayos* emphasized space, and especially the political and economic inequalities generated by geographic differences—between northern and southern Italy, in the case of Gramsci; between coastal and highland Peru, in the case of Mariátegui. While

Gramsci emphasized spatial inequalities, Mariátegui read them historically, over time, as the results of colonialism and imperialism (Aboul-Ela, 2007, p. 31). Likewise, while the central issue for Gramsci was the gap that had opened up between the proletariat of the north and the peasantry of the south, Mariátegui only mentions the proletariat sporadically, as an important phenomenon in the growth of Peru's cities. Mariátegui was clearly conscious of the role that class analysis played in European Marxism; its sporadic, ever-changing character was one of the aspects that he underlined.

414 One of the most salient characteristics of this interpretation of Latin American reality was his analysis of the cause of the spatial inequalities that colonial rule created. In the chapter on Peru's economic evolution in *Siete ensayos*, Mariátegui makes clear that the attainment of national independence (across Latin America generally, and in Peru in particular) did nothing to free the region from economic dependency, which was only consolidated when trade and financial exchange between the new nations and the new empire grew in the nineteenth century. Here, Mariátegui had done an in-depth analysis of the intrusion of North American hegemony at a time when other writers, especially the "Arielistas," perceived only a vague, abstract, spiritual threat from the North and never approached to the social-economic heart of the problem.

The other fundamental aspect of Mariátegui's thought is his critique of lineal, teleological time, which he declared inappropriate for explaining Peru's complex situa-

tion. He intensified this critique when he had the unprecedented idea of creating a “cultural field” where rationality and myth might meet. This came from the impact of Georges Sorel—or rather, the myth of Sorel—on Mariátegui’s thought. Introducing Sorel in one of his key essays, “El hombre y el mito” (1925, p. 28), as “one of the representatives of twentieth-century French thought,” Mariátegui counted him as a critic of Marx on the path towards parliamentary social democracy. Indeed, Sorel’s influence was important because his ideas took the place of Marxist orthodoxy in Mariátegui’s analysis of the process of industrial civilization. This important change, which can also be seen in the work of Piero Gobetti (Paris, 1980, p. 127), is fundamental to an understanding of “El hombre y el mito,” the essay in which Mariátegui explains “the Sorelian theory of myth.”

415

Criticizing the exclusively rational nature of the perception of historical time, Mariátegui justified “the peremptory need for myth” as a vacuum—infinite space, in Pascal’s terms—that opposed and even dissolved “the idea of Reason” on the plane of life experiences. Insisting that humans are “metaphysical animals” and that “without a myth, the existence of man makes no historical sense,” Mariátegui, influenced by Sorelians such as Édouard Berth, emphasized the role of myth in the explanation of human events. Robert Paris argued, quite accurately, that “Pascal’s wager,” which oriented the Sorelian concept of myth, had no place whatsoever in any individualist philosophy that was divorced from community (Paris, 1980, p. 137). Thus,

myth, the irrational or mystical element inherited from Sorel, appears in Mariátegui's works as the instrument of a dialectic that seeks to bring the values of the past into the present. In this return of the past, one cannot help noticing a metahistorical paradox similar to the one St. Paul enunciated when he spoke of values that are of the world but that do not reside in the world. In other words, the sphere of myth cannot be that of modern Reason, and in the final analysis rational, lineal, teleological discourse is also incapable of explaining the intricacies of the complex realities of Latin America.

416 When he returned from Europe, Mariátegui was faced with a great agrarian convulsion, which, as in 1915, affected every local jurisdiction in the southern Andes. The structural tension between peasant and landowning economies, the preaching of the *indigenistas*, the conflicts between midsized merchants and regional bosses—these facts brought out for Mariátegui the messianic, nativist stamp of this stubborn past, which refused to disappear, which indeed was very much present in every uprising that took place, always preceded by the rebirth of indigenous culture.

The persistence of “then” within “now”

Mariátegui's thinking grew out of his consciousness that Peru was immersed in a very different reality from Western societies, so he was particularly sensitive to the fact that Peruvian reality combined different times, superimposing disparate stages of history in a single territory,

from the primitive to the modern industrial economy. For Mariátegui, this motley Peru did not call for a modernized theory but for a collective myth, which, as a true “wager,” would fight to realize its values, even without a guarantee of success. There was, then, an undercurrent of spontaneous enthusiasm in his thought. We can see it in the relationship he established between “the mystical wager,” indigenous communities, and the past as resource for the present. How can we explain this “wager,” which brought the indigenous community and its constitutive values closer to the present?

When he compared the Peruvian and European experiences, Mariátegui observed that the *criollo* class of large landowners wanted to skip a basic stage in capitalist development: they wanted to become entrepreneurs without first undergoing the necessary dissolution of feudalism. In his judgment, this was an unrealizable dream; the landowners were behaving like feudal lords and rentiers, and were unable to transform their class character into that of a genuine bourgeoisie. What path, then, did the country need to follow? Should the great landowners disappear? Be forced, perhaps, to learn in the hard school of small-scale farming? Such a solution would have led Mariátegui to back the standard liberal ideal of creating a numerous agrarian petite bourgeoisie. Perfectly aware of this liberal solution, Mariátegui radically distanced himself from it, proposing instead a utopian solution whose protagonist and agent would not be the *criollo* or mestizo small landowner living from his rents, but the indigenous peasant.

The indigenous people, then, with their social and cultural forms from the pre-Hispanic past, would provide the necessary elements for solving the land problem that had been created first by Spanish colonial rule and then by liberalism. We can now glimpse the ways in which, for Mariátegui, the situation of Peru had modified the traditional Marxist schema: first, its bourgeoisie was not a true bourgeoisie but merely a group of aristocratic liberals or liberal oligarchs, incapable of creating the conditions for the rise of capitalism; second, the protagonists of its socialist revolution would have to be a proletariat expanded to include the indigenous peasantry.

418 Mariátegui's point of departure was an idea developed by Manuel González Prada, a Peruvian anarchist who deeply influenced the country's left in that era: the indigenous question was not a problem of philosophy or culture, but primarily of economics and agriculture; it was a question of distributing land to benefit the country's masses, four fifths of whom were indigenous and peasants. Of course Mariátegui was well aware of the vast differences between modern communism and the communism of the Inca era, systems that were only comparable in "their essential and incorporeal likeness, within the essential and material difference of time and space" (Mariátegui, 1971, p. 74). Here we see the modification wrought by Andean space on the lineal concept of time in European Marxism. If socialism had to be imported, it would have to be by discovering the proper soil, the exact geocultural conditions, that would allow it to flourish: it couldn't be thought of as a

mere blueprint. It was a new European creation, and it demanded a precise knowledge of the terrain.

Having described the problem, Mariátegui, like his contemporary Luis E. Valcárcel (1927), found that he had to re-think the *ayllu*, the indigenous Andean community structure, not as an analogue to modern socialist structures, but as something distinct, something that could only be understood if one started from a meticulous analysis of the local space within which it existed, that is, an analysis of Peru's agrarian history. Nevertheless, and despite the need to undertake a detailed analysis of how the indigenous community—the non-modern structure of modernity—should be incorporated into the nation, Mariátegui expressed his conviction that an indigenous resurgence would not come about through a process of material “Westernization” of the Quechua lands, but through myth.

419

It was a surprising conclusion, and it led his critics to accuse Mariátegui of being inconsistent. In effect, Mariátegui argued that the great landowners were incapable of “skipping ahead” and becoming capitalist entrepreneurs without first going through the stage of the dissolution of feudalism, yet at the same time he was arguing that the marginal, exploited indigenous peasantry could go straight from their serf-like condition to socialist organization. That is, in one case he believed in the necessity of a Westernizing, feudal dissolution/capitalism building process, while in the other case he felt that indigenous peasants could skip all that and achieve socialism directly. Is there really a contradiction between these two arguments? I think not. With his conceptualization of the indigenous community, Mariáte-

gui was simply arguing that the mobilizing power of myth transcended that of liberalism, and became one with the power of the indigenous masses. But there was still a need to organize a working-class protagonist that could carry out the socialist revolution. It wasn't that the indigenous people should take the role of the proletariat; it was that the proletariat should expand and become much more inclusive. In other words, if his wager on mysticism went beyond individualist liberalism and connected Mariátegui with the indigenous masses, his Marxism forced him to rethink who the protagonists of revolution would be and to assign a key role to the peasantry. But this did not mean that his would be a Marxism only for the peasants and would exclude the industrial proletariat. Quite the contrary: Mariátegui insisted on the importance of the proletariat and spoke of a class-based party, a workers' party that would include both industrial workers and peasants.

In sum, Mariátegui called for total revolution in Peru. To achieve this, he called on the strength and influence of messianic sentiments and argued that it was imperative to incorporate them into his revolutionary project. Aware that Marxism could only have a chance for success in Peru if it first joined together with Andean culture, Mariátegui introduced the mystical wager of the indigenous community into his thinking. Indeed, the defense of community strengthened their rejection of capitalism. Due to the non-contemporaneity of this contemporaneous structure, Peru could follow a different historical evolution from that of Europe. In reality, as Antonio Cornejo Polar argues, Mariátegui looked at the course of Peruvian history as a

“process of conflicts imbricated in a future in which certain alternatives are hegemonic in each moment, while under the surface, subordinate options constantly arise that could become salient and then hegemonic at some future period”; he goes on to point out that “what once was hegemonic can subsist residually for greater or lesser amount of time” (Cornejo Polar, 1993, p. 60-1). Mariátegui located himself in the tension between these opposing contemporaneities, according to Cornejo Polar, on a radically terrain of analysis and reflection: the problem was not to develop capitalism, nor to recapitulate the history of Europe and Latin America; it was to construct Peru’s own way forward. Thus, it could be said that the essential trait of his thought was the rejection of progress and the lineal, Eurocentric image of world history.

421

On negativity: “subalternity” and “pueblo”

How should we understand the ethnic problematics of Mariátegui’s texts today? Should we look at it strictly in terms of the view of lineal history associated with modernity? Perhaps be amazed by the obstinacy with which ethnicity has refused to disappear, and then admit that it had to be in order for us to attain our longed-for social cohesion? I think there is no clear answer to these questions, because, as I have been arguing throughout this essay, the key to solving the problem of ethnicity cannot be history if history is conceived as unidirectional progress towards a final, universal, and totalizing goal.

Two points should be clarified here. First, the unity of social actors—whether designated by the concept of “subalternity,” or of “the people”—is not the result of some pri-

or logical connection that can subsume all subjective positions under a single, predetermined conceptual category. “The people” is always a contingent moment, a “floating signifier” (Laclau, 2005, p. 129) that “fills up” with a plurality of social demands through “equivalential (metonymic) relations of contiguity” (p. 227). Having no a priori constitutive role, these demands are permanently in flux.

422 Second, the passage from one configuration of “the people” to another involves a radical break, not a chain of events located in logical order, and so the temporal causality of such events is fragmented. This doesn’t mean that the elements of the emerging formation must be totally new, but rather that the point of articulation—the partial object around which hegemonic formations are constructed as new wholes—does not arise from any sort of logic related to the historical time of modernity. In this way, what is decisive in the emergence of “the people” as a new historical actor is that they should be able to articulate popular demands, not that there be any prior logic to coordinate those demands. Laclau explains that speaking of the people means referring to a “constitutive and not derivative” configuration; that is,

it constitutes an *act* in the strict sense, for it does not have its source in anything external to itself. The emergence of the ‘people’ as a historical actor is thus always transgressive *vis-à-vis* the situation preceding it. This transgression is the emergence of a new order (Laclau, 2005, p. 228.)

The constitutive aspect of the “politics of the people” is very visible in Mariátegui’s analysis of Peruvian reality. His version of socialism called for building new social relations and a new state that would overcome the limita-

tions of the parliamentary system and bourgeois democracy. His raised understanding of peasant rebellions in the Andes, and the debate on *indigenismo* that he helped start, show that Mariátegui was aware of another possible way of situating socialism, far removed from orthodox Marxism. Revolutionary but nondogmatic, Mariátegui counterposed heterodoxy against revolution. Indeed, his Gramscian notion of the “popular/national” was closely linked to the fact that the Peruvian working class was small in numbers. It caused him to pay close attention to other social groups that were also being exploited. The limited number of industrial workers could be supplemented by joining forces with peasants, sugar and cotton plantation laborers, and artisans.

423

Finally, and in correlation with today’s indigenous movements, Mariátegui supported the role of the peasantry because he was one of the first to think about them from the perspective of their unusual condition as both a class and an ethnic group. They were peasants, but they were also Indians, that is, human beings who stubbornly held onto their own culture in spite of Spanish colonial domination and the persistence of feudalism after independence. Mariátegui saw quite clearly that, if indigenous culture had managed to keep its own languages and customs, that was because the material bases of the culture had also been consistently maintained. In this way, as Robert Paris has noted (1980, p. 119-44), Mariátegui’s Peruvian socialism had room for both workers and peasants, encompassing both within its view of “the proletariat.”

By incorporating the indigenous into his view of the new popular subject, Mariátegui linked artisans to poor peasants, plantation and industrial workers, and middle-class intellectuals. He clearly contrasted his socialism with the construction of the democratic subject as imagined by the dominant sectors. Thus, in his popular politics the vanguard of the proletariat would be the miners, with their double status as both workers and peasants. Therefore Mariátegui, far from conceiving of an authoritarian party, opted for a socialism that intended not to solve every possible conflict, but rather to unite the masses and offer them an identity. The construction of the popular subject was, then, a serious attempt to raise once more the subject of revolution, assigning the peasantry a key role in it. This
424 does not mean that Mariátegui denied the importance of the working class, only that he strove to build a class-based party that would include both workers and peasants. The construction of “the popular” placed Mariátegui’s Andean humanism far ahead of that of other progressive thinkers of his time.

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