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Latin America

Mariátegui's Heroic Socialism

- Features -

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José Carlos Mariátegui was Latin America's most original Marxist. And his work is strikingly relevant for confronting the continent's right-wing backlash today.

Latin America's first, most original Marxist thinker was born on June 14, 1894, in Peru's southern department of Moquegua. José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930) is remembered today as the rarest of radical intellectuals, Latin American or otherwise: a figure whose influence not only endures across the long arc of twentieth-century political thought but evolves apace with the most varied historical contexts. From dependency theory to liberation theology, from decolonial theory to the Latin American Pink Tide, the history of the region's radical thought can, and has been, read as an extended exegesis on the writings of José Carlos Mariátegui, or “the Amauta,” as he was known to comrades.

There's no better entrée to Mariátegui than his [Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality](#), an unprecedented work of Latin American Marxist theory whose ninetieth anniversary this year is the perfect excuse to revisit his legacy.

The Amauta's life was brief as it was intense. A life-threatening illness kept the young Peruvian bedridden for large parts of his youth and deprived him of almost any formal schooling. Nevertheless, those years of convalescence saw Mariátegui developing into a formidable autodidact with a forceful, some might say melancholic, disposition. Still only a teenager, Mariátegui began writing in Lima's periodicals as a means to support his family, and by 1918, inspired by the far-flung Russian Revolution and a local strike wave, he declared himself a committed socialist.

The parallels between Mariátegui and Antonio Gramsci are so striking that few biographers can escape comparisons. Heterodox Marxists, militant journalists, founders of their countries' respective communist parties, both writers were marked by lifelong physical frailties and suffered intense political persecution. Beyond these anecdotal similarities, Mariátegui had also spent his formative political years as an eyewitness to Italy's Biennio Rosso, experiencing firsthand the Turin factory councils of 1919–1920 and in the following year, the foundation of the Communist Party of Italy in Livorno.

Although there's no evidence the two revolutionaries ever crossed paths, Mariátegui drew influence from his Italian experience in a manner that can't help but recall the author of the *Prison Notebooks*. In Italy, Mariátegui had discovered a nation lacking the venerable traditions of socialist thought more typical of France or Germany. All the same, a vibrant Marxist philosophy had put down roots in the peninsula, blossoming from the characteristically Italian historicism of Benedetto Croce.

This encounter with the peninsular “philosophy of praxis” proved decisive in Mariátegui's future formulations. For one thing, the idea of a vernacular Marxism would become a hallmark of Mariátegui's “Indo-American Marxism.” That Italian influence was also translated into his uniquely voluntaristic understanding of the Marxist method, conceived as the unity of thought and action, conscious and material transformation. In Mariátegui's preferred terminology, “socialism as a heroic creation.”

Tempting though it is to imagine Mariátegui as the sum of his disparate influences (Croce, Sorel, Marx, Surrealism, Indigenismo, to only name a few), his most lucid interpreters prefer to understand the Amauta as a visionary interlocutor with the epoch's emergent revolutionary possibilities. Hence his likeness to Gramsci, based more on a common stock of concerns than any direct influences.

For example, the Gramsci of the “Southern Question” finds its corollary in Mariátegui’s call to “Peruanize Peru.” In Gramsci’s case, the Southern Question revolves around the elaboration of a national-popular program capable of politically integrating the subalterns marginalized by the very process of Italian nation-formation. For Mariátegui, to “Peruanize Peru” meant promoting a nationalism-from-below that could challenge the nationalist impositions of Peru’s creole oligarchy and the chauvinist patriotism emanating from Europe.

Upon his return to Peru in 1923, Mariátegui entered on the mature phase of his intellectual project. Apart from penning the Seven Essays, the 1920s found the Peruvian steering a unique cultural enterprise known as *Amauta*. This monthly journal of “doctrine, arts, and literature” brought together avant-garde arts, Marxist polemics, and indigenous politics for the purpose of spearheading a nationwide cultural rebirth.

With its socialist politics front and center, *Amauta* offered a vision of Marxism as the privileged conduit to channel and amalgamate the era’s the most advanced expressions and ideas: a vanguard culture in which Marxism, as the common adhesive, would eventually become synonymous with culture itself.

During the same period, Mariátegui engaged in debates with fellow travelers on the Peruvian left. The most high profile of those disputes took place with Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, founder and leader of the influential American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA). Where the two figures had once shared common political ground in the early 1920s, by 1928 they had parted ways over the question of revolutionary change.

Haya de la Torre had abandoned his earlier Marxism in favor of a “populist” line, defending a class alliance between indigenous, bourgeoisie, and proletariats in order to overcome feudalism and defeat imperialism. Marxism on this view was a strictly European theory, tailor-made for the old continent’s social reality but ill-suited for Latin America’s “semi-feudal” development.

Mariátegui’s reply was forthcoming: only revolutionary socialism could provide the program for an authentically anti-imperialist position. But just as he was defending the universality of the Marxist method against accusations of “Eurocentrism” from the growing APRA ranks, Mariátegui was facing a different set of charges on a separate front. In 1929, Mariátegui’s recently formed Socialist Party of Peru (note the anomaly: a communist party that retained the socialist banner) was invited to attend the Comintern’s first Latin American Conference. However, Mariátegui’s Peruvian envoys provoked a scandal by refusing to kowtow to the Third International’s prescription for a democratic-bourgeois revolution, the “correct” path for the so-called “colonial and semi-colonial nations.”

Unable to physically attend as his illness had progressed considerably, Mariátegui’s *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* was conveyed to the Latin American Bureau’s head, Victorio Codovilla. The Argentine Codovilla, famous for his hardline Stalinism, looked with contempt on the volume. “Interpretive essays” and “national realities” was the stuff of petit-bourgeois dilettantes.

As news of the scandal traveled back to Moscow, the Soviet apparatchiks were particularly incensed by Mariátegui’s advocacy for an “Incan communism”: the notion that the seeds of the communist utopia were already present in the region’s millennial indigenous communities, just as much as the revolutionary internationalism of the Soviet Union. Mariátegui writes in his *Seven Essays*: given the “practical socialism in agricultural and indigenous life [...] the communities represent a natural factor for the socialization of land.”

Of course, Mariátegui recognized that the transition from anticapitalist communalism to socialist revolution would require a proletarian subject, but here too his thinking went against the grain. Rather than through the development of productive forces, the Andean peasantry would become proletarian through the socialist revolution itself: revolution as the process of becoming the subject-of-revolution, or, more poetically, what Mariátegui called the struggle for a

“heroic creation” of the socialist society (note, here, the echoes of Che Guevara’s voluntaristic, humanist socialism, outlined in his “Man and Socialism”).

Denounced as “populist” by the Comintern’s intelligentsia, Mariátegui’s “romantic anticapitalism” would later become a cornerstone in the thought of Franco-Brazilian Marxist philosopher Michael Löwy. Under the category of “Romantic Marxism,” Löwy has put Mariátegui at the center of an intellectual pantheon that includes Benjamin, Gramsci, and Bloch. Each of these in their own way had grasped that for every historical setback, revolutionary impasse, or popular defeat, there were still utopian fragments among the ruins of the past that could be spun into lines of resistance and alternative routes forward.

The romantic-revolutionary critique of capitalism, particularly in its radical variant typified by Mariátegui, insists not on a literal return to the past (nowhere in Mariátegui is there a nostalgic longing to recreate the autarkic Incan empire), but rather the recuperation of historical references capable of shedding light on the contingent nature of our capitalist present, and the resuscitation of modernity’s own self-betrayed emancipatory potential.

As Löwy himself recognizes in his [Marxism in Latin America](#), the dramatic scene with the Comintern marked one of the closing chapters in Latin American Marxism’s golden age of theoretical creativity (Juan Antonio Mella, the founder of the Cuban communist party, belongs to this epoch as well). The ensuing decades of intellectual sterility and Soviet bandwagoning begins, fortuitously, in 1930, the year of Mariátegui’s death.

The Peruvian’s legacy would enjoy a significant revival among the Latin American New Left in the 1960s-70s. Until that time, Mariátegui’s intellectual project stood for decades as the most daring attempt to rescue a vital Marxism from the twin dangers that vexed the region’s leftist tendencies. According to Löwy, those are: a nativist temptation to reject as foreign any theories that aspire to universality “Marxism, in the main” and, on the other hand, the lure of accepting uncritically said universality and ignoring local particularities.

Nowhere was Mariátegui’s balancing act between the universal and the singular more lucidly displayed than in his *Seven Interpretive Essays*, where a rigorous Marxist analysis illuminated the concrete socio-economic and cultural formations of Peruvian society in a dialectical manner that recalls Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* or Lenin’s *Development of Capitalism in Russia*. We spoke with Löwy on the occasion of the ninetieth anniversary of the *Seven Interpretive Essays*, to remember the Peruvian’s legacy and ask after his relevance in the present.

NA: I’d like to begin by asking about the work you’ve presented in Lima for the ninetieth anniversary of the *Seven Interpretive Essays*. You draw a comparison between Walter Benjamin and José Carlos Mariátegui. Where do you see their points of commonality?

ML: Despite belonging to very different cultural universes “Andean America and Central Europe” Benjamin and Mariátegui share a lot in common: not just their heterodox adherence to communism and their sympathetic views of Leon Trotsky, but also their interest in the thought of Georges Sorel, their passion for surrealism, and their “religious” vision of socialism. Most important of all, both thinkers shared a romantic critique of modern civilization that is inseparable from their hostility to positivism and the ideology of “progress.” The affinities between the two are so striking, it’s a wonder the two weren’t familiar with each other’s work.

NA: And for Mariátegui, what does a revolution without progress look like?

ML: As Benjamin stated in the *Arcade Projects*, his objective was to develop a form of historical materialism that broke with the ideology of progress. Mariátegui did similarly. In his “Two Conceptions of Life,” he rejected, in his words, “the superstitious respect for the idea of Progress,” a “dull and accommodating philosophy,” as he called it.

For Mariátegui, revolution is never the product of “progress” but rather the recovery of the pre-Colombian communist past.

NA: Can you elaborate on that last point? A “pre-Colombian communist past” sounds suspiciously like what Marx and Engels called “primitive communism.” Is Mariátegui advocating for a reversion to a communalist past?

ML: Indeed, there is a similarity with primitive communism as it has been defined by the Marxist tradition. Worth noting, Rosa Luxemburg used the expression “Incan communism” when discussing the various forms of primitive communism in her *Introduction to Political Economy*. In Peru, this refers to the *ayllu*, the peasant communities that were the social base of the Incan empire, which existed in the Andean region before Columbus “discovered” the Americas and the Spanish colonialists conquered it. Mariátegui does not, of course, advocate for a return to the pre-colonial past, but he does see in the collectivist traditions of the indigenous communities a powerful basis for developing the modern communist movement among the peasantry.

NA: Can you say a few words about the specific theoretical perspective that would allow Mariátegui to identify the peasantry and indigenous as the protagonists of the communist movement?

ML: As I tried to explain, Mariátegui saw in the collectivist traditions of the indigenous peasantry a powerful support for their enrollment in the communist movement. Moreover, in their struggle for land, the peasant masses necessarily enter into conflict with the capitalist-landowner oligarchy and could be won over to a socialist-communist vanguard, since this would be the only political force fighting for radical land reform.

NA: People speak of Mariátegui as the “first Marxist” in Latin America, while others go further and call him the creator of a uniquely Latin American Marxism. What sense is there in speaking of a specifically Latin American Marxism, as opposed to, for example, a “peripheral Marxism”? Put differently, why bother with the distinction when Marxism's very object of analysis, capitalism, is itself universal?

ML: I think in the case of Mariátegui the three perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Mariátegui is indeed the first Marxist in Latin America. True, there had been other authors that referenced Marx in earlier writings, like Juan B. Justo, the Argentine translator of *Capital*. But Justo never understood Marx. His thought was grounded much more in the era's positivist philosophy than in Marx.

In effect, Mariátegui is the first thinker to propose a Marxist analysis of Latin American social formations, namely, in his *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*. Despite his adherence to communism, Mariátegui never accepted the official Stalinist doctrine of the Comintern — the need to pass through a “democratic bourgeois phase” in Latin America. For him, the only alternative to imperialist domination would be what he called “Indo-American Socialism.”

It also makes perfect sense to speak of “Latin American Marxism,” and not just because Mariátegui's thought is mainly dedicated to Peru and Latin America. His point of view was deeply rooted in the continent's culture and history. Likewise, one could also speak of a peripheral Marxism, since Mariátegui shared with others — from Latin America, Asia, and Africa — a vision of capitalism situated at the margins of the system.

But I feel it important to emphasize that Mariátegui's Marxism is universal. This universality is present not only in his writings on capitalism, but also in his reflections on a number of other subjects: the Marxist method; the revolutionary ethic; the mystical vision of socialism, culture, and the arts; not to mention his polemics in defense of an anti-positivist philosophy and his critique of progress as an illusion.

These represent profoundly innovative contributions to Marxism as such. I think it would be a mistake to let Mariátegui's reputation hang only on his brilliant essays on Peruvian reality. His "universal" thought is on par with his intellectual peers of the 1920s and '30s: Walter Benjamin, Antonio Gramsci, or Ernst Bloch. Put bluntly, Mariátegui is one of the greatest Marxist thinkers of the first half of the twentieth century.

NA: And what about the charge of "Eurocentrism"? Couldn't we take that accusation and, in the case of Mariátegui, turn it on its head and say that the Peruvian is an example of Marxism's universality, the living evidence of the theory's capacity to "evolve" through its encounter with peripheral social formations that lay beyond the scope of Marx's original formulations?

with peripheral social formations that lay beyond the scope of Marx's original formulations?

ML: Mariátegui was neither Eurocentric nor anti-European. His great achievement was to offer a dialectical synthesis between the Latin American singularity and the universality of the Marxist method. Of course, he reinterpreted the Marxist method with the aid of certain figures, particularly Georges Sorel and Miguel Unamuno, going on to develop a uniquely romantic-revolutionary strain of Marxism.

NA: A more orthodox Marxist might question, in light of such eclecticism, whether Mariátegui was even a Marxist at all. What would you say in response?

ML: Is there a "Marxometer" that could measure whether people who claim to be Marxists are or are not "true Marxists"? José Carlos Mariátegui considered himself a Marxist, one of his books is called *Defense of Marxism* (1930), and he joined the Communist International in 1928. I don't see how one could deny him the Marxist identity! In fact, Marxism is a very heterogeneous category: André Tosel, a well-known French (Gramscian) Marxist, wrote that there exist a "thousand Marxisms." One can criticize some of them, or argue that they completely misunderstood Marx, but it is not very helpful to argue over "who is a true Marxist."

NA: The question of Mariátegui's orthodoxy or heterodoxy seems to be relevant at least in terms of understanding his reception. Marginalized by the Third International, he was later rediscovered by the Latin American New Left in the 1970s, and more recently, commemorated by South America's Pink Tide. What relevance do you feel Mariátegui has at present? What new readings can be performed in light of the present conjuncture?

ML: Every era, with their unique political forces, will have their own reading of Mariátegui. As concerns the present moment, I feel that his vision of a type of socialism that is "neither a copy nor a tracing" of other historical experiences, but rather a "heroic creation" of the Latin American peoples, a creation based on their culture, their history, and traditions, this strikes me as an extremely relevant idea for the present age.

His emphasis on the Indo-American roots of communism, expressed throughout his writings, can also be applied to the struggles of African Americans. Mariátegui's vision is often mentioned in relation to "multiculturalism," or "plurinational" institutions, but it has to do mainly with communitarian traditions that are in open conflict with capitalism and that bear within themselves a radically subversive potential.

For too long the Latin American left has been "tracing and copying" other socialisms, particularly the Soviet model. Perhaps the time has come to re-discover, again, Mariátegui's provocation to find a new path that is rooted in the cultures and practices of the Latin American popular classes.

NA: And do you see any political forces on the continent that, explicitly or not, are following this type of path? I know that João Pedro Stédile, the leader of Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement, is a great admirer of Mariátegui.

ML: Of course, there have been great Peruvian thinkers such as Aníbal Quijano and Alberto Flores Galindo who followed his example. Then you have indigenous political leaders, such as Hugo Blanco, who have been influenced by Mariátegui's thought. More recently, one can find examples of his impact in figures such as Hugo Chavez or in peasant movements such as the MST that you mention. But I think the present-day revolutionary movement that best embodies Mariátegui's general vision "and not necessarily because they follow his writings" can be found in the Zapatista experience in Chiapas.

NA: You've emphasized that the concept of revolution carries a particular significance for Mariátegui. As you've suggested, it's a constant throughout his writings that sometimes resembles a religious faith, as if revolution were a force imbued with divine redemptive powers. Is this not something of an anachronism in our present situation, characterized as it is by more modest political ambitions, or even counterrevolutionary horizons if we are considering the Latin American context?

ML: Without a doubt, the political present in Latin America is showing all the signs of a powerful counterrevolution. But then, the question is: when confronted with this scenario, isn't it all the more necessary to reassert the revolutionary horizon? How can we begin to imagine lifting the oligarchy's iron heel off our backs "with the reactionary, authoritarian, and repressive brand of neoliberalism we are now seeing" without also pursuing the radical transformation of the underlying economic, social, and political structures? Of course, revolutionary processes often begin with the kinds of struggles we might call "modest," based on concrete demands and circumscribed forms of confrontation.

Beyond that, the majority of Latin America's revolutionary events for at least the last fifty years have been connected to some form of "religious faith or redemptive force," as you call it. That is to say, liberation Christianity or liberation theology. Without bearing in mind this component, it's impossible to grasp the revolutionary processes that took place in Central America from the 1970s to the 1990s, or for that matter, the Zapatista uprising of 1994. The emancipatory potential of this continental tradition remains extremely vital and is far from being exhausted.

But beyond the strictly religious dimension of the phenomenon we are describing, it is impossible to really imagine a large-scale movement that struggles, resists and fights for radical social change without also drawing on a certain "faith, passion, will and mysticism," as Mariátegui used to say. [The full quote reads: "The strength of the revolutionaries lies not in their science; it is in their faith, their passion, their will. It is a religious, a spiritual, a mystical force."]

NA: You're alluding to Mariátegui's much-discussed ideas on the revolutionary myth. That concept might be interesting to revisit today in light of the prevalent reactionary myths that are in circulation. Could Mariátegui, who witnessed the rise of fascism in Italy and wrote a considerable amount on the subject, offer any insights into the current extreme right turn in Latin America?

ML: The reactionary myth is born out of its confrontation with the revolutionary myth. The fascist counterrevolutionary myth, as we know, was erected against the rising tide of Bolshevism. What the fascist myth seeks to do is monopolize patriotism. As Mariátegui wrote, fascism "spreads its patriotic flag to cover up all its contrabands, its doctrinal and programmatic equivocations." These words, written about Italian fascism in 1925 and published in Mariátegui's *The Contemporary Scene*, are extremely relevant nowadays in Latin America.

NA: Some of your more recent work explores the possibilities of an eco-socialist perspective. Mariátegui's broader vision of socialism is as a civilizational alternative to capitalism, could this not provide some inspiration or guidance for an emerging ecosocialist politics?

ML

Mariátegui can't provide us with ready-made answers to all of today's problems, no more than Marx or Lenin can. Mariátegui never expressed any kind of environmental concerns, which is more than understandable considering the environmental problems of his age were nothing like the crisis we are currently living through.

But beyond that, by viewing his radical critique of the capitalist system as a critique of a whole civilizational system — that is, not just the critique of the extraction of surplus value — or his rejection of the bourgeois ideology of progress, or his elevation of the indigenous communitarian traditions, if we take all these factors into account, his work indeed represents a very significant contribution to the development of ecosocialist thought.

All across the American continent, from Canada to Patagonia, the indigenous peoples are at the vanguard of the resistance against the capitalist destruction of nature. They are the most resolute defenders of the rivers, the trees, and the earth, the ones fighting against the cruel ecological devastation perpetrated by oil and mining multinationals, by the agro-industry.

This is an opposition rooted in the material life-conditions of the indigenous communities, in their very survival. But it is also a conflict between an indigenous spirituality and the spirit of capitalism. What Mariátegui has done is provide us with an important key for understanding the indigenous communities as protagonists in today's socio-ecological struggles.

As one of Mariátegui's greatest admirers, the Peruvian indigenous and peasant leader Hugo Blanco, liked to say: "We Indians, we've been practicing ecosocialism for five centuries now."