

Latin American Marxist: José Carlos Mariátegui

July 30, 2012

WHILE MOST ENGLISH SPEAKERS don't know him, the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui ranks as one of the great Marxists of the twentieth century. It was Mariátegui who originally asked the question which seems so relevant today: How does one make socialism in Latin America with Indians? He answered by turning the question around in the other direction: Indians in Latin America will be at the center of the fight for socialism in Latin America. The idea that the native peoples of America would be the subjects of their own history and important actors in world history represented a revolutionary departure for the continent's intellectuals if not for the Indians themselves. The indigenous peoples themselves had already shown in numerous uprisings and revolts—most notably the Tupac Amaru II insurrection of 1780-81 that seriously threatened the Spanish Crown's control of Peru—that they were quite capable of being the subjects of their own history. It was Mariátegui who reminded leftist intellectuals of the Indians' potential for revolutionary agency and suggested that it was they who would create revolutionary parties, communes, and soviets in Latin America. This new anthology of Mariátegui's writing is particularly timely today, as Evo Morales heads the Bolivian government, the first indigenous person to do so. (The first indigenous president, we might note, is now facing protests by the indigenous.)

Now, thanks to Harry E. Vanden and Marc Becker, we have once again available in English not only most of Mariátegui's most important writings, but the most complete English language collection of his work ever published. (His name is pronounced *mah-ree-AH-tay-gee*, the last syllable as in gee-up not as in gee-whiz.) Vanden and Becker, however, see Mariátegui very differently from the way I do. Like me, they see Mariátegui as outside the Stalinist tradition, but when they read Mariátegui, they are reminded of Amílcar Cabral, Rabrindanath Tagore, and "even Mao-Tse-tung." They believe that his thought "nourished the early Marxist thought of Che Guevara." I couldn't disagree more with these comparisons. As I read him, Mariátegui has nothing to do with these various nationalist and Communist political thinkers and leaders. The editors like Mariátegui because he is what they see as a "non-dogmatic" and non-doctrinaire leftist—while I like him precisely because he is rather dogmatic and doctrinaire. He is doctrinaire in the sense of being absolutely committed to the Marxist method—but with that method, he showed a remarkable creativity. He took the European Marxist labor movement's experience and understanding of revolutionary socialism and forced it to confront the reality of Peru and its agricultural and indigenous society. That confrontation between workers' revolution, Bolshevism and soviets (workers councils), on the one hand, and Peru's combination of merchant capitalism and remnants of feudal control over indigenous peoples, on the other, produced the most interesting and insightful Marxist writings on Latin America.

A Revolutionary Life

MARIÁTEGUI WAS BORN in the town of Moquegua in the province of Arequipa, Peru on June 14, 1894. His father was a criollo and a member of the political and economic aristocracy of Peru, while his mother was a *mestiza* or perhaps an Indian. Typical for such cross-caste marriage in Latin America, his parents were never married, and his father abandoned the family while Mariátegui was still an infant, so that he never knew his father and was raised by his mother. After a sickly childhood, at the age of 15 Mariátegui was apprenticed to a newspaper print shop, becoming a typesetter in the year 1909. Two years later he began to write for the paper using the pseudonym Juan Croniqueur. While working at the newspaper, Mariátegui organized a guild or union, The Circle of Journalists.

As a journalist Mariátegui soon became much more than a mere *croniqueur*. He wrote literally hundreds of articles on literature, science and the arts, including articles on the psychoanalysis of Freud, the physics of Einstein, and the socialism of Marx. By 1917 Mariategui was writing political articles as well. Under the impact of the Russian Revolution, Mariátegui and a group of young journalists and students launched the critical journal *Nuestra Epoca (Our Era)*. He and his associates supported the South American university reform movement, and criticized the participation of the military in politics, for which impertinence Mariátegui was beaten. During this period Mariátegui evolved in a socialist direction and founded another radical publication *La Razón*. By 1918 or so, Mariátegui was on his way to becoming the leader of Peru's socialist movement.

But Mariátegui's Peruvian political career was suddenly interrupted. On July 4, 1919 Augusto B. Leguia, the President-elect of Peru, carried out a coup with the support of the military and established a civilian-military dictatorship. Mariátegui at once wrote an article critical of the new regime. The new dictator Leguia, probably influenced by Mariátegui's elite background, responded by giving Mariategui an ultimatum: either accept a "scholarship" to study abroad in Europe, or go to prison. Not surprisingly, Mariategui accepted Leguia's "scholarship" and went off to Europe where he worked as a journalist writing on European events for Peruvian newspapers. The experience in Europe was to have a profound impact upon Mariátegui's thought and life.

On his way to Europe, Mariátegui passed briefly through New York, then went on to Paris, and later to Geneva. He also traveled through Germany, but eventually spent most of his European exile in Italy. As a journalist in Europe Mariátegui interviewed many of the leading intellectual and political figures of the day including authors Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland, Georges Sorel, Maxim Gorky, and Gabriel D'Annunzio. Living in Italy, Mariategui was in touch with Italian socialist leaders such as Giacinto Serrati, Filippo Turati, and Antonio Gramsci. Mariategui was an avid reader of Gramsci's socialist workers' newspaper *Ordine Nuovo*, through which he followed the political debates of the Italian labor and socialist movement. The Peruvian's idea of socialism grew up in this milieu where revolutionaries debated the relationship between workers' power and socialist politics.

Europe in the period from 1918 to 1924 experienced a revolutionary upheaval as governments fell in Russia, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey. Everywhere workers engaged in strikes, occupied factories, and formed factory councils. In various countries there were attempts at insurrections. Mariátegui, who spent most of his time in Italy, was present in Turin when workers there occupied the factories and attempted to run them under workers' control. He also attended the Livorno Congress of the Italian Socialist Party and witnessed the split of that organization that created the Italian Communist Party. A year later he witnessed the rise of Benito Mussolini at the head of the Fascist movement that would soon consolidate power over the defeated workers' movement. Through these experiences and his immersion in the European left, Mariátegui became a revolutionary socialist whose Marxism was strongly influenced by Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

At the same time, Mariátegui was strongly influenced by the revolutionary syndicalist movement, which had swept Europe a decade before, and by its French ideologue, Georges Sorel. Sorel, an unorthodox Marxist, had himself been influenced by the vitalism of French philosopher Henri Bergson. Sorel combined Marxism with Bergson's vitalism to produce a Marxist theory that stressed voluntarism, the role of the will. The audacity of Lenin and the Bolshevik party seemed at the time to exemplify the voluntarist spirit which, taking advantage of the objective conditions, pushed through all barriers to revolution. It was in Italy, rather than in his native France, that Sorel's voluntarist Marxism found a following. And among its followers was Mariátegui. If there was something un-doctrinaire about the Peruvian revolutionary it was the emphasis on voluntarism, yet that was something common to the Marxist intellectuals of the early 20s and one finds it too in Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness*.

When Mariátegui returned to Peru in 1923, he found that a new radical movement had developed. The young student leader Victor Raul Haya de la Torre had founded the González Prada Popular University (UPGP), named after Peru's most famous radical writer, and the magazine *Claridad* (*Clarity*). At the same time, the workers and peasants had joined together to create a United Front of Manual and Intellectual Workers. When in 1924 Haya de la Torre was expelled from Peru for his political activities, Mariátegui assumed the editorship of *Claridad*. Still under the political leadership of Haya de la Torre, who remained in exile in Mexico and then Europe, the United Front of Intellectual Workers changed its name to *La Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana* (The American Revolutionary People's Alliance—APRA). Mariátegui became a member of the APRA, then still an alliance or coalition and not yet a political party.

Yet Mariátegui was already moving in his own direction. In 1926 Mariátegui founded his magazine *Amauta*, an Inca word meaning "wiseman," with the intention of applying Marxist theory to Peruvian and Latin American problems. Just a year later, on May 1, 1927, he helped to found the Peruvian labor federation, *Confederación General de Trabajadores* (CGT), and on November 10, 1928 began the publication of the workers' newspaper *Trabajo* (*Labor*). Mariátegui's socialist orientation and Haya de la Torre's multiclass populist movement were incompatible, and by May of 1928 they had broken off political relations. On September 16, 1928 Mariátegui founded the Socialist Party of Peru, which immediately affiliated with the Communist or Third International. Under Mariátegui's leadership, until his death in 1930, the Socialist Party of Peru represented a critical and independent party within the Communist International, and one that resisted the International's new Stalinist leadership.

Mariátegui's Peru

AFTER HE RETURNED FROM EUROPE TO PERU, Mariátegui turned his Marxist analytical tools to the analysis of his homeland's economic, social, and political conditions. He rejected his contemporaries' arguments that the "Indian problem" was principally a racial or an ethical problem—arguing that it was principally an economic problem. As a Marxist his method was fundamentally historical and structural, tracing in his essays and books—most importantly in his *Seven Essays Interpreting Peruvian Reality*—the economic and social transformation of his homeland. The pre-Colombian Inca communism, he argued, had been a more viable and successful civilization than the Spanish conquerors' feudalism. Inca society had supported a population of ten million in relative prosperity while the Spaniards reduced the country to one million living in misery.

The independence revolutions between 1810 and 1825 had succeeded only in further depredations upon the indigenous peoples, leading to a regime based on the landlord's *latifundios*, the great estates, and the peasants' servitude. In the mid-19th century, Peru became inserted into Britain's economic empire and into world capitalism, producing crops for export. While mining had long been an important industry and petroleum had recently emerged as significant, Peru was above all an agricultural nation. Mariátegui's Peru was fundamentally capitalist, but divided into two regions with very different economic and social systems. Coastal Peru had great modern capitalist farms, agribusiness if you will, with a multiethnic—indigenous, mestizo, mulatto, and Chinese—agricultural proletariat. Highland Peru, however, remained feudal, with *gamonales*, landlord-bosses, oppressing and exploiting the bound, indigenous labor force. So Mariátegui saw his nation's history.

His analysis led him to conclude that the Socialist Party of Peru, of which he had taken the lead in founding, would have to fight to overcome feudalism as it struggled for socialism. Unlike Haya de la Torre who admired the Kuo-Min-Tang in China precisely it had formed a "bloc of classes"—peasants, workers, petty-bourgeoisie, and nationalist bourgeoisie—to fight for democracy first and for socialism later, Mariátegui insisted that it would be the working class which would lead

the fight for both bourgeois democracy and socialism. His position would have put him at odds with the later Stalinist Communist Party which in Peru and many other developing nations argued that the left should support, ally with or enter capitalist parties to fight feudalism, bringing about capitalist societies before it could fight for socialism. Mariátegui had seen the Italian workers take the factories, and he expected to see the Peruvian workers—miners, agricultural workers—take their workplaces and take power.

How would a socialist party organize in Peru? Mariátegui argued that it would have to be organized by the Indians themselves, speaking their native languages, organizing in the villages and on the plantations. Just as the European bourgeoisie's Enlightenment ideas of nationalism, republican, parliamentary government, and laissez-faire capitalism had penetrated the Creoles permitting them to carry out bourgeois revolutions in Latin America, so too the European ideas of labor unions, socialism, and soviets would penetrate the indigenous laboring masses, making it possible for them to carry out the socialist revolution in Peru and the rest of Indo-America. Nothing could be further from Mao-Tse-Tung's party-as-army and the totalitarian government it created, nor from Che Guevara's guerrilla foco theory of revolution. Mariátegui believed that the Indians, as proletarians and feudal serfs, would be capable of behaving in the same revolutionary manner as Russian workers and peasants had.

When the Stalinist counter-revolution began in Soviet Russia, Mariátegui was far from the action. As between 1924 and the 1930s Joseph Stalin succeeded first in taking control of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and then of the Communist International, few Latin Americans were aware of the issues. In the late 1920s, Latin America's Communist parties were few and small and communications with Europe were intermittent. Stalin's men dominated the Communist International and the Trotskyists had difficulty in making their views known in Europe, much less in Peru. As first Georgi Zinoviev and then Stalin tightened up the organization, Mariátegui fought to defend the independence of the Peruvian Socialist Party, in part symbolically by preserving the name Socialist rather than Communist. Mariátegui never took a position in favor of any of the pretenders to the leadership of the Communist movement, neither Bukharin, Zinoviev, Stalin nor Trotsky. While he seemed to try to keep his party's distance from Stalin's International, his few remarks about Trotsky are skeptical. The Peruvian's position has to be inferred from his own writings, which emphasized the unique Indian character of Peru, but at the same time his own commitment to workers' revolution.

Vanden and Becker have produced a very good translation, faithful to the powerful prose of the original and generally graceful in English. The editor translators help the English reader by occasionally making small additions or changes to the Spanish, for example adding Las Casas' first name. The interpolation of Mariátegui's footnotes into the text, on the other hand, was probably a mistake, though not a big one. The anthology, based on the Spanish language edition of Mariátegui's works, brings together the material topically, but at the cost of breaking up the Peruvian's great book, the *Seven Essays*. All of those interested in Marxist theory, Latin American history and politics, and in the role of the indigenous peoples in the social, labor and left movements should read this book. Perhaps you will find Mariátegui interesting not because he is un-doctrinaire, but because he exemplifies the best of the Marxist doctrine and method that is so relevant today.