

José Carlos Mariátegui's uniquely diverse Marxist thought spans a wide array of topics and offers invaluable insight not only for historians seeking to better understand the reality of early twentieth century Peru, but also for revolutionaries desiring to flexibly apply Marxism to unique social, economic, and political circumstances. Mariátegui's primary theoretical contributions can be found in his analysis of Peru's historical economic evolution, its relationship to the global capitalist system, as well as his views on the so-called "indigenous problem"—an issue intimately bound together with Peru's economic circumstances. Mariátegui saw Peru as a country defined by imperialist subjugation, with a rural population made up of a heavily exploited, primarily indigenous population, with the potential to serve as a bulwark of revolutionary strength. Mariátegui was one of the first Marxist thinkers to recognize the revolutionary potential of the peasantry given conditions of semi-feudal socio-economic and political domination. In this way, Mariátegui can be seen as a precursor to other Third World revolutionaries of the twentieth century—Mao Tse-Tung, Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, and Che Guevara.

As a Marxist, Mariátegui invested a great deal of intellectual energy analyzing the economic factors influencing Peru's social and political problems. Mariátegui concluded that early twentieth century Peru was a country simultaneously containing three separate economic systems. The first of these was a semi-feudal rural economy—a still potent holdover from the era of Spanish colonial rule. For Mariátegui, feudalism was the primary hindrance to Peru's development. Not only was it a system imposed on the country by Spain, but it was also a backwards economic model that was, in actuality, inferior to the previously existing pre-colonial Incan economy. According to Mariátegui, the Incan empire was able to maintain an ever-expanding population—reaching ten million inhabitants at its peak—through the implementation

of a system defined by large-scale collective agriculture and vast public works. Based on his research and analysis of Incan civilization, Mariátegui concluded that, far from increasing production, “[t]he Spanish conquistadors destroyed this impressive productive machine without being able to replace it.”<sup>1</sup> This initial destruction of the Incan economy had left Peru indefinitely shackled to colonial and imperial control. Even with the defeat of the Spanish and the formal triumph of the bourgeois revolution culminating in the formation of the Peruvian Republic following the War of Independence, the semi-feudal Spanish economy remained in full force throughout much of the country. However, at the same time, remnants of the former indigenous agricultural economy still existed in some areas. Although it had largely been destroyed, Mariátegui believed that vestiges of indigenous agricultural communism could be utilized as the basis upon which modern, socialist collective agriculture might be built. The third economic system then existing within Peru was a modern capitalism centered primarily along the coast—out of the grasp of the feudal rural bosses. However, as Mariátegui observed, this primarily coastal bourgeoisie was “backward at least in its mental outlook”<sup>2</sup> and did not have the power to resist either internal domination from feudal holdovers or external domination from imperialist forces. In order to affect development independent of these semi-colonial shackles, a socialist revolution would be necessary.

These unstable, conflicting forces within Peru’s internal economy allowed for acute foreign capitalist penetration that distorted Peru’s economy towards raw commodity exports. Following the War of Independence, rather than carrying the revolution to its logical conclusion, the national bourgeoisie did not have the power to confront feudal forces head on and, therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> José Carlos Mariátegui, “Outline of the Economic Evolution,” *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*. Accessed from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/mariategui/works/1928/essay01.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

allowed the landowning elite to maintain its social, political, and economic power. While substantial elements of the colonial economy were formally outlawed (the *mita* and *encomienda*, for example), the economy maintained its feudal character. Although indigenous serfdom was technically eliminated, Mariátegui concluded that “[t]he revolution had not really brought a new class to power. The professional and commercial bourgeoisie was too weak to govern. The abolition of serfdom, therefore, never became more than a theoretical statement because the revolution had not touched the landholding system.”<sup>3</sup> And, even where production took on a bourgeois character, defined by wage labor and industrial technology, it did not allow for any significant national capitalist development. The more advanced industrial coastal estates were geared almost entirely towards exports to foreign powers—largely Great Britain initially; later, after the construction of the Panama Canal, primarily the United States. Although the coastal estates had reached a “more or less advanced technical capitalist level... their exploitation still relie[d] on feudal practices and principles.”<sup>4</sup> Mariátegui traced the historical development of capitalist enterprise in Peru, beginning with the export of guano and nitrates and culminating in the production and export of sugar and cotton. He concluded that the Peruvian economy remained “entirely dependent on the economic colonization of Latin America by Western capitalism.”<sup>5</sup> Always geared towards foreign markets, this type of economy led to what Mariátegui described as “invisible exports.”<sup>6</sup> The profits from Peruvian mining and agriculture did not stay in Peru, but instead flowed out of the country—towards North America and Europe. The Peruvian economy could only recover some of this money by requesting loans, thus further deepening the cycle of exploitation and semi-colonial subjugation.

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<sup>3</sup> Mariátegui, "The Land Problem," *José Carlos Mariátegui: An Anthology*, 85.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Mariátegui, "Colonial Economy," *José Carlos Mariátegui: An Anthology*, 134.

Mariátegui's solution to the problem of economic dependence and imperialist subjugation was socialist revolution. This revolution would be at once anti-feudal and anti-capitalist. Mariátegui saw that the national bourgeoisie was incapable of carrying out the progressive functions that had historically belonged to the bourgeoisie in Europe and North America. Instead of bringing about national development, Peru's weak national bourgeoisie recognized "cooperation with imperialism as the best source of profits" and, therefore, did not "worry seriously about national sovereignty."<sup>7</sup> Consequently, Mariátegui, as a socialist and anti-imperialist, recognized the power of an authentic Peruvian nationalism. This nationalism was not to be a platform in and of itself, but was, for Mariátegui, a natural extension of the socialist revolution—the only course of action that could "permanently and truly oppose the advance of imperialism."<sup>8</sup> The influence of Lenin's writings on imperialism can be clearly seen in Mariátegui's thought. Likewise, Mariátegui's recognition that, while the nationalism of the European and North American world powers was "reactionary and anti-socialist", the nationalism of colonial peoples was "revolutionary, and therefore ends in socialism"<sup>9</sup>, foreshadows the ideology of later Third World revolutionaries.

For Mariátegui, this Peruvian national revolutionary identity would be defined by its emphasis on the situation of its indigenous peoples—making up as much as four-fifths of the Peruvian population according to Mariátegui. Mariátegui asserted that "[t]he current economy, current Peruvian society, suffers from the original sin of the conquest. This is the sin of having been born and having been formed without the Indian and against the Indian."<sup>10</sup> Mariátegui

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<sup>7</sup> Mariátegui, "Anti-Imperialist Point of View," *José Carlos Mariátegui: An Anthology*, 266.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>9</sup> Mariátegui, "Reply to Luis Alberto Sánchez," *José Carlos Mariátegui: An Anthology*, 175.

<sup>10</sup> Mariátegui, "The Economic Factor in Peruvian History," *José Carlos Mariátegui: An Anthology*, 120.

intended for the Peruvian socialist revolution to be born with, by, and for the Indian.

Mariátegui's emphasis on the plight of indigenous people has much to do with the climate in which he was writing. *Indigenismo* was very much in vogue at the time of Mariátegui's intellectual formation and ideological work. Its emphasis on the study of indigenous culture and society certainly informed much of Mariátegui's own thought on the matter. However, Mariátegui went beyond the narrow reverence for the pre-Colombian Incan civilization that dominated a great deal of *indigenista* intellectual work and, instead, incorporated his knowledge of indigenous life into a Marxist analytical framework that did not simply look to the glory of the past, but also envisioned a better future in which traditional native communal practices would be fused with modern scientific socialism.

As Mariátegui saw it, the so-called "Indian problem" was primarily a socio-economic problem. It could not be reduced to "any thesis that confines the question to one or another of the following unilateral criteria: administrative, legal, ethnic, moral, educational, ecclesiastic."<sup>11</sup> Mariátegui saw that the establishment of an independent republic in Peru had failed to forward the cause of the indigenous people, and, in many instances, actually increased their suffering. While the bourgeois revolution established formal equality and ended the immensely oppressive and exploitative *mita* forced labor system, there was little change in practice. The *mita* was ultimately replaced by the similarly oppressive road labor draft and indigenous lands were increasingly swallowed up by large landed bosses, leading to increased dispossession and peonage. In his analysis of the plight of Peru's indigenous population, Mariátegui affirmed that

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<sup>11</sup> Mariátegui, "Outline of the Economic Evolution," *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*. Accessed from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/mariateg/works/1928/essay02.htm>.

they had “an instinctive and deep demand: the demand for land.”<sup>12</sup> Mariátegui advocated an agrarian reform that would combine traditional Incan agrarian communism with modern socialist collective agriculture. Dividing indigenous lands into small individual plots only allowed the owners of the large rural estates to more easily absorb indigenous land. The solution would, therefore, be collective ownership. In the highlands, this would mean confronting the power of rural, feudal lords who ruled large swaths of land as de facto fiefdoms. No matter the formal, legal rights of the indigenous population, in these areas, landowners enforced their own rules and codes. Mariátegui described the situation as follows:

“Landowners practically consider their estates to be outside the jurisdiction of the state, and they are not the least bit worried about the civil rights of the people who live within the boundaries of their property. They collect excise taxes, grant monopolies, and impose sanctions restricting the freedom of the laborers and their families.... And frequently the huts for the workers are not significantly different from the sheds that housed the slave population.”<sup>13</sup>

As a result of this ongoing, intense exploitation, the indigenous peasants comprised a potential pool of staunch supporters of the socialist revolution. If they desired land above all else and recognized that the bourgeois state had no ability to provide them with land or even any real alleviation from the rule of the semi-feudal landed estates, they would likely turn to Marxists who offered the fulfillment of their primary demand—the right to the land.

Mariátegui’s appraisal of the revolutionary potential of the indigenous rural population of Peru was a truly innovative, ingenious adaptation of Marxism to the specific conditions existing in Peru. His analysis was based on both an understanding of the historical roots of the Incan agricultural economy and an informed Marxist theoretical approach. In this way, Mariátegui can be seen as one of the foremost Marxist thinkers of the twentieth century, and a pioneer in the

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<sup>12</sup> Mariátegui, "The Problem of Race in Latin America," *José Carlos Mariátegui: An Anthology*, 322.

<sup>13</sup> Mariátegui, "The Land Problem," *José Carlos Mariátegui: An Anthology*, 105.

practical application of Marxism to the conditions of a semi-feudal, semi-colonial Third World society. His understanding of Peru's internal economy, its relation to the wider global capitalist system, and his conception of the central position of the indigenous rural population in the socialist revolution makes Mariátegui a uniquely influential revolutionary thinker.