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The Contributions of
José Carlos Mariátegui to Revolutionary Theory

by

Thomas Angotti*

Maestro, hermano, te seguiremos cantando,
seguiremos llamándote. Así no estarán
solos nuestros pueblos en su dura ascensión
a la libertad y a la dignidad.

—Pablo Neruda, from Poemas a Mariátegui

José Carlos Mariátegui is one of the most important twentieth century revolutionary leaders in the Americas. The French writer Henri Barbusse once remarked, “Do you know who Mariátegui is? He is America’s new luminary. The prototype of the new person of that continent” (see Del Prado, 1983: 179).

Now, 55 years after his untimely death, Mariátegui’s contributions to revolutionary Marxism, both in theory and practice, are finally being acknowledged not only in his native Peru but throughout Latin America as well. With the victory of Sandinismo in Nicaragua, the democratic, anti-imperialist forces in Peru have adopted “Mariáteguismo” as their common reference point. Mariáteguismo now promises to be the symbol of the largest and most unified revolutionary Left in South America during the 1980s.

Perhaps one of the most telling signs of the richness and complexity of Mariátegui’s thinking and the breadth of his work, is the way Mariátegui is “claimed” by a broad spectrum of intellectual and political forces, both within and outside the revolutionary Left—much as Gramsci in Italy. Mariátegui’s probing analyses of Latin American history and culture, his literary criticism, his meticulous dissection of classes and strata within Peruvian society, especially the indigenous peasantry, have won admiration from a wide range of intellectuals, political figures, and cultural workers.

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To some mainstream observers, Mariátegui is just an independent-minded intellectual with a few (unfortunate) ideas about socialism (Meseguer Illán, 1974); to revolutionary nationalists and Maoists, like the Sendero Luminoso guerrillas, he is an advocate of rural-based peasant-led revolution; to some social democrats associated with the APRA¹ party he is an advocate of gradual reform based on a multi-class party (like APRA); to others on the Left he is a nationalist disillusioned with the international communist movement (Flores Galindo, 1980) or an idealist with only a shallow grasp of historical materialism (Paris, 1981) or a "creative" Marxist who was so unique he could never be associated with an organized political force (Aricó, 1978).

The most consistent, and perhaps most common, interpretation of Mariátegui considers him a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist who made a signal contribution to the understanding of the centrality of the indigenous question to the Peruvian revolution, but was also convinced of the leading role of the proletariat and closely tied to the international communist movement. This assessment has been upheld mainly by the communists themselves (for example, Del Prado, 1972, and 1984; Levano, 1981; Falcón, 1978), but is shared by other scholars (Vanden, 1975; Basadre, 1981; Weisse, 1959). This assessment often includes a sober acknowledgement of some of the contradictions and early vacillations of Mariátegui (Melis, 1971). However, from the period of his death until the 1960s, when there was an upsurge in sentiment for national independence in Peru, there was a marked tendency among the communists to downplay the seminal contributions of Mariátegui. Often cited is a critique of Mariátegui by a Soviet author (Miroshevski, 1942) that portrayed Mariátegui as a populist and proponent of peasant revolution rather than an advocate of the leading role of the proletariat.

Of these interpretations, which comes closest to accurately summing up Mariátegui? In the following pages, I will try to demonstrate that the communist assessment of Mariátegui is, despite some tendencies to deify Mariátegui and turn his works to dogma, generally correct.

The myriad interpretations of Mariátegui are in part the result of his intellectual breadth; his works cover a wide range of topics and can be read on several different levels. They are also, however, a function of his evolution as a Marxist. Mariátegui began his trajectory toward Marxism as a radical intellectual mostly absorbed in journalistic pursuits and literary criticism. Over the years his thinking evolved con-
siderably, and he even came to repudiate some of his earlier works once he had fully adopted a Marxist world outlook. Of course, this makes any attempt to sum up Mariátegui in terms of the young Mariátegui alone a rather one-sided enterprise. It was not until the last five years of his life that Mariátegui’s theoretical and practical work reached its pinnacle, with the publication of his best-known writings and his catalytic role in founding the Peruvian trade-union and communist movements. These were the years when Mariátegui thoroughly embraced socialism.

José Carlos Mariátegui was no historical anomaly. He was the product of the rise of imperialism in the Americas. He reflected the emergence of the fledgling proletariat in the early twentieth century, and its striving for a strategic alliance with the oppressed rural masses, made possible, and necessary, by the decline of the Latin American oligarchies and assertion of a new ruling class organically linked with the United States. He was, in short, a conscious expression of the objective motion toward socialism in the Americas.

In this article, I will attempt to review Mariátegui’s contributions to revolutionary Marxism. This article could easily focus on any one of the numerous aspects of Mariátegui’s life and work that have become the subject of both scholarship and political debate. However, the purpose here is to synthesize this work and develop a picture of the overall significance of Mariátegui—especially given that so little is known about him in North America. As with any synthesis, this task necessarily excludes many details and leaves many questions unanswered.

Mariátegui’s contributions fall into three main categories. The first involves the role of the subjective factor and conscious element. This includes Mariátegui’s classical critique of economism, his work in cultural criticism and philosophy, and his role in founding the Peruvian communist movement. The second is a historical-materialist analysis of classes and class struggle in Peru. This includes the creative analysis of “the Indigenous Question” as central to the class struggle in Peru, regional and cultural differences, and the leading political role of the small, nascent proletariat. This is among the first examples of the application of the Marxist method to the concrete conditions in Latin America. Third, he developed the internationalist approach to the question of national democracy. This is expressed not only in Mariátegui’s solidarity with the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions of
his day, and the Soviet Union, but in an organic analysis of imperialism and the international working class.

Before proceeding with my analysis, it would be well to briefly review Mariátegui's life within the context of the period in which he lived.

PROFILE OF MARIÁTEGUI'S LIFE

Mariátegui was born in 1895 into a poor provincial family. His family moved to the Lima area when he was still young, and he soon became involved in various literary and publishing projects. As he advanced in the world of journalism, he ran up against the conservative cultural biases bred by the moribund Peruvian oligarchy, and developed an inclination toward social criticism. In 1918, he cofounded Nuestra Época, a newspaper dedicated to social criticism; it lasted only two issues, as Mariátegui came under heavy attack for a criticism of the Peruvian Army's social composition. In 1919, he cofounded La Razón, a daily paper squarely in opposition to the autocratic regime of Augusto Leguía, whose rule as President became a model for dictatorships in the twentieth century.

Under pressure from Leguía's government, Mariátegui went to Europe with his close associate Jorge Falcón, where he lived until 1923. His experiences there, especially in Italy, marked a turning point in his development as a socialist. He witnessed and studied the revolutionary upsurges in the European working class and had contact with the nascent communist movement there; he gravitated toward the forces associated with the Third International, and developed an appreciation for the significance of the Bolshevik Revolution (Mariátegui, 1969; Nuñez, 1978).

When he returned to Peru in 1923, he plunged into political work. He taught at the Universidad Popular González Prada and became its rector, while at the same time he continued his journalistic activities in a number of major Lima publications. His lectures at the university reflected the internationalist perspective he had consolidated in Europe (Mariátegui, 1959c).

In 1926, Mariátegui founded the journal Amauta (Amauta means teacher in Quechua, the most common Indian language; Mariátegui
has now come to be known in Peru as "El Amauta"). The new journal brought together progressive intellectuals in the exploration of a broad range of revolutionary ideas and was one of the most exciting enterprises in Peruvian history; to this day, it remains one of the most important projects in forging a national identity among Peruvian intellectuals.

After he published an article supporting the struggle of Augusto Sandino in Nicaragua against U.S. intervention, Mariátegui was arrested, probably at the behest of the United States Embassy in Lima. In the face of Leguía's charge that Mariátegui was part of a "communist conspiracy" directed by Moscow, he insisted that he was "a tried and true Marxist" who did not believe in conspiracies, and for whom Peruvian socialism could not be "a carbon copy." With the support of a broad range of Peruvian intellectuals and the workers' movement, Mariátegui was released and soon resumed his activities.

In 1928, Mariátegui formally broke with the attempts by Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre to found a Peruvian party based on APRA. Like Haya de la Torre, Mariátegui sought the unity of revolutionaries around a single strategic conception, program, and organization that encompassed the particularities of the class struggle in Latin America, and more specifically in Peru. However, Mariátegui rejected APRA's notion that, unlike Russia and Europe, the transition to socialism in Peru would be essentially a gradual, uninterrupted process characterized by the accumulation of reforms. He would not accept Haya's conscious attempts to distance the Peruvian revolution from the revolutionary experiences and movements in other parts of the world. He rejected APRA's orientation towards a multiclass party based on the petty bourgeoisie in favor of a proletarian party whose strategic conception was the forming of a worker-peasant alliance. That same year, Mariátegui formed the first cell in what was to become, in 1929, the Peruvian Socialist Party, and soon after his death the Peruvian Communist Party.

As mentioned above, the last five years of Mariátegui's life (1925-1930) were his most intellectually productive. *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* (1928) is undoubtedly his best-known and most original work, and perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of the Peruvian class struggle. *Peruanicemos al Peru* (1970), a collection of articles spanning the period 1924-1929, also focused on the particularities of Peruvian reality. *La defensa del Marxismo* (1959b), first published posthumously in 1934, was an incisive cri-
tique of revisionism and defense of revolutionary Marxism. *La escena contemporánea* (1976), first published in 1925, reflected Mariátegui’s evaluation of a number of European intellectuals and lessons from his European experience.

El Amauta died in 1930 of complications from a childhood injury that had left him crippled and confined to a wheel chair for the last years of his life. He was only 35 years old. To be sure, Mariátegui’s many significant contributions to the Peruvian revolution could only have multiplied had he lived longer. Still, it is noteworthy that despite his short life, his brilliant leadership has been a source of inspiration to the generations that followed him—in Peru and across the continent.

**THE ROLE OF THE SUBJECTIVE FACTOR AND THE CONSCIOUS ELEMENT**

Mariátegui’s most important contribution to the Latin American revolution is his focus on the role of human consciousness as a reflection of history and as a crucial force in shaping history—that is, the subjective factor. This took the form of critical analyses of religion, philosophy, art, ideology, and literature. His works are filled with an appreciation for, and critique of, the role of the subjective factor in the class struggle, as concretized in the individuals who brought that consciousness to bear in changing historical reality—or, the conscious element. He took up the major intellectual trends in Europe and Latin America and analyzed their theoretical expressions in class terms. His subjects included both cultural and political figures: Lenin, Trotsky, Tolstoy, and Gorky in Russia; Croce, D’Annunzio, Pirandello, and Marinetti in Italy; Zweig, Zola, Sorel, and Barbusse in France; Diego Rivera and José Vasconcelos in Mexico; José Martí in Cuba; and in Peru, the artist José Sabogal, the poet José Eguren, and writer Martín Adán, and the Apristas Haya de la Torre and Luís Alberto Sánchez (Mariátegui 1950, 1959a, 1970, 1976). To this list many more can be added. Mariátegui’s intellectual vigor was interminable, and he took up every expression of human consciousness with a characteristic curiosity and concreteness, completely devoid of dogmatism. This enabled him to analyze the complex intellectual currents all the way from the philosophical handmaidens of fascism—such as D’Annunzio—to the leadership in socialist theory—such as Lenin,
Juarès, and Liebknecht—touching all the major liberal and conservative currents in between the two. Unlike the literary gadfly, Mariátegui dealt with these ideas in a concrete fashion, within a relatively consistent political and ideological framework. This was all part of his contribution to the process of building the ideological center of the Peruvian working class with an internationalist, revolutionary Marxist outlook.

The main debate today over Mariátegui is precisely over this focus on the development and significance of ideas. Some, such as Robert Paris (1981), believe that Mariátegui was an inveterate idealist. On the surface, one need only consider his extensive and sympathetic treatment of Sorel, Gobetti, Croce, and other idealists; his repeated use of the term “myth” to describe certain concepts, such as socialism; or his unity with contemporaries who put forth the precapitalist formations of “Incan communism” as a model for Peruvian socialism.

Paris (1981: 8) states, for example, that “if he had been a ‘Leninist’ like many of his contemporaries, Mariátegui would not have written ‘The Indian Question.’” In this essay, Mariátegui asserts that the key to an “Indian renaissance” lies not in its “Westernization” but in “the myth, the idea of socialist revolution” (Mariátegui, 1928: 35). Is this, as Paris claims, a classical inversion of materialist dialectics?

This example demonstrates the dangers of basing any interpretation of Mariátegui, or any other individual, on specific quotations rather than a comprehensive assessment of his work. In the very same essay cited by Paris, Mariátegui clearly begins by framing the question in materialist terms:

*The Indian question starts with our economy. It has its roots in the regime of land ownership. Any attempt to resolve it with administrative or police measures, by education or road projects, amounts to superficial and secondary labor, as long as the feudal rule of the ‘gamonales’ exists* [Mariátegui, 1928: 34].

Following this essay on the “Indian question,” Mariátegui gets to the heart of his basic thesis: the land question is the key to the emancipation of the indigenous population, the basis for their political and ideological transformation, and for their identification with the historical mission of the urban proletariat, socialism. Thus, “the agrarian question is, above all, a question of the liquidation of feudalism in Peru (1928: 51). It is hard to imagine a more materialist way to pose the question. It was not any innate cultural or psy-
chological "idea" of the Indians that made them strategic allies of the proletariat, but the oppressive property relations that dominated the countryside. The continuing presence of the collectivist institutions in the Andes (in particular, the ayllu, a form of communal production) explained the prominence of collectivist ideas in the Indian communities, and was the basis for the worker-peasant alliance. In other words, the "myth" of Indian communism was thoroughly grounded in the material and historic conditions of the Indian community (see discussion, in the next section, of the Indian question).

Apart from Mariátegui's materialist analysis of Peruvian society, we also have his explicit critiques of idealism in general, and all the notable idealists of his time in particular. Defensa del Marxismo (1959b) includes a fairly orthodox presentation of the philosophical precepts of Marx, Engels, and Lenin and a direct repudiation of the idealism of Croce and Sorel. Peruanicemos al Peru (1970: 80-87) contains his critique of Edwin Elmore's quixotic idealism. However, along with his critiques we always find an appreciation for the contributions of these thinkers within the next context of their class position. For example, Mariátegui's admiration for Croce (much like Gramsci's) stems from Croce's ability to articulate forthrightly the interests of the rising Italian bourgeoisie in opposition to feudalism. Croce was a sort of "organic" intellectual, who projected the necessity for a unified nation over the aggregate of provincial Italian interests, much as Mariátegui saw the need for a unified Peru, only under working-class rule. Croce was a liberal intellectual in many ways far ahead of his class (which to this day has not fully consolidated its rule in some aspects of Italian society and remains politically and ideologically underdeveloped in comparison with the capitalists in other European nations). Finally, Mariátegui's approach is very much in the Marxist tradition; after all, Marx himself admired Hegel, and incorporated many of the advances he made in the Marxist philosophical method.

To some, the fact that Mariátegui paid so much attention to the cultural leaders of bourgeois society is automatic proof of his own ideological backwardness; that he could discover any historically progressive aspects to bourgeois culture is absolute evidence of his corruption. However, Mariátegui clearly located his cultural criticism within the context of historical development. For example, his appreciation of Peruvian writer Martín Adán stems not simply from Adán's literary skills, which were considerable, but his ability to express the nonconformist, antiestablishment sentiments of a discontented
bourgeoisie frustrated by the traditional straitjackets of a declining oligarchy. In typically materialist fashion, Mariátegui notes how Adán himself is not conscious of the historical role he was playing (Mariátegui, 1970: 150-154).

Another crucial factor in assessing Mariátegui is his evolution from a radicalized liberal thinker, journalist, and literary critic to a Marxist-Leninist via the philosophical rebelliousness of the “Risorgimento” thinkers such as Croce, anarcho-syndicalists such as Sorel and radicals such as González Prada (in Peru). Like Gramsci, Mariátegui was of humble background and gravitated toward the intelligentsia during his youth. Both absorbed the most dynamic ideas accessible to them at the time (much as Marx and Engels absorbed Hegel)—and ultimately rejected their idealist underpinnings. They had a profound appreciation for the contributions of revolutionary bourgeois intellectuals, especially in a setting in which a chasm existed between these intellectuals and their own ruling class. They also identified with those intellectuals who gravitated toward the revolutionary working-class groundswell that surrounded them—like Sorel—even though their system of thought was flawed by idealism and ambiguity. Mariátegui was impressed for example, that Sorel was one of the few syndicalists of the time to defend the Bolshevik Revolution (see García Salvatecci, 1979).

To assess Mariátegui, or Gramsci or Marx, based on his early works necessarily yields a one-sided picture. It ignores the process of maturation (which, unfortunately, was incomplete even at the time of his death), and Mariátegui’s own repudiation of some of his earlier thinking. It leads to an evaluation of Mariátegui as a Marxist humanist (Kossok, 1971).

There is an opposite tendency to treat Mariátegui’s theory as a uniform reaffirmation of Marxism-Leninism, without contradictions, lapses and incomplete elements. (I believe Del Prado [1984] best exemplifies this tendency.) This approach is no less one-sided, and no less a denigration of Mariátegui’s dynamic contributions to Marxist theory.

Especially given that so many of Mariátegui’s books are collections of many diverse articles, it is necessary to have a broad overview of the literature and synthesize its main elements. Any pedantic attempt to prove the point with isolated quotations may give an impression of authority or logical consistency, but in actuality will be deceptive (see Luna Vegas, 1984). No less disarming is the tendency to rely on
anecdotes and personal reminiscences to portray Mariátegui's development (see Del Prado, 1983).

Mariátegui's attraction to the European idealists is also accompanied by a profound political commitment—the struggle against the revisionist tendencies in the socialist and working-class movements. In *La defensa del Marxismo* (1959b), he directly criticizes the classical revisionism of Eduard Bernstein, and several current versions such as that of Henri De Man. His defense of Marxism was aimed specifically at the distortions of mechanical materialism that downplayed the role of the conscious element in history.³

However, Mariátegui's critique goes far beyond the explicit exposure of distortions of Marxist theory. The critique is implicit in all of his work. It is to be found in his persistent preoccupation with the creative role of political leadership and its ability to utilize every ideological instrument at its disposal—every "myth"—to advance the revolutionary process.

Mariátegui's materialist understanding of the role of consciousness is not only to be found in his own declarations; it is apparent in his actions. The subjective factor was not a self-indulgent or utopian concept; it was the central factor in attempts to change material reality. Mariátegui returned from Europe to dedicate himself to the political and ideological training of the Peruvian working class by starting at the logical beginning—the formation of a conscious revolutionary vanguard. To undertake this enterprise, he turned to the intelligentsia and students, whose access to a worldview could open them up to socialism's promise, just as Mariátegui had seen that promise maturing in Europe and the Soviet Union. However, far from resting all his hopes on the educated elite, he sought out, supported and guided the first major working-class organization in Peru, the first confederation of trade unions. These concrete projects reflected the fusion of revolutionary theory with practice—hardly the hallmark of idealism.

A HISTORICAL-MATERIALIST ANALYSIS OF CLASSES AND THE CLASS STRUGGLE IN PERU

If all Mariátegui had done was contribute to the revival of revolutionary Marxism and refutation of mechanical materialist and reformist versions of Marxism, he would still have left an important mark
on both the Peruvian and international working-class movements. However, his most enduring contribution was in the application of Marxist theory to the elaboration of a revolutionary strategy for national liberation in the concrete conditions of Peru.

Mariátegui's *Siete ensayos* was and remains today a classic analysis of Peruvian society to all revolutionary sectors of the population. For the nascent proletariat, it called attention to the significant mass of impoverished Indians without whose alliance no socialist revolution could be won or consolidated. For the Indians, it was a verification of their awakening from centuries of servitude and a milestone in the establishment of Indian culture as a pillar of Peruvian society. For the urban bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, it presented for the first time a clear and precise picture of the economic and social resiliency of the precapitalist relations of production in the countryside whose replacement was directly linked to their own ascendency over the rural oligarchy.

Through its probing class analysis, *Siete ensayos* captures the particularity of Peru's underdevelopment and unlocks the doors to its national history and culture. Whereas this could bring some important lessons to all classes, it was an especially critical revelation for the Peruvian proletariat. Unfortunately, for many decades after Mariátegui's death, the proletariat, given the weakness of its leadership, was mired in its own narrow trade union battles, and forgot the profound lessons of *Siete ensayos*; at times it even cultivated its own criollo biases against the indigenous population.

There are two main points in *Siete ensayos*. The first is that the Indian question is central to Peruvian society. The second is that this question is expressed in every realm of Peru's political and social life—Mariátegui uses the examples of education, religion, government, and literature.

Mariátegui's analysis of the Indian question starts from the growing awareness that the vast majority of Peru's population—at that time about 80%—were still wedded to a semifeudal agrarian system of production and distribution, and lived in conditions of utter poverty contrasted with the urban population. He saw Peru as a dual society—one part was largely rural, indigenous and oppressed, and the other was urban, criollo, and relatively well off. This did not mean that the urban proletariat oppressed the rural Indians, but it did mean that they enjoyed a position of relative economic and social privilege. In concrete political terms, this meant that there were objective divisions be-
tween the urban proletariat and its natural ally, the rural indigenous population; these divisions were based on their different relations to the dominant mode of production and were reflected in very real differences in standard of living and economic opportunity. It was the central task of the Peruvian revolution to go beyond these divisions and forge a strategic alliance between workers and peasants—for such an alliance did not appear spontaneously but had to be consciously built by the proletarian party.

Unlike functionalist sociologists, however, Mariátegui’s concept of dualism was based on a class framework. Thus, the urban proletariat obviously did not enjoy the same degree of privilege as the urban bourgeoisie; rather, its relation to production and its conditions of life were in general much more similar to the peasant than the bourgeoisie. Because of the persistence of collective forms of ownership and semifeudal relations of production in the countryside, the Peruvian peasantry, relative to the peasantry in other Latin American nations, was much less rooted in small property ownership, and therefore had a strong basis for unity with the urban proletariat in the mission of bringing about socialism. Likewise, the urban proletariat in its struggles against capitalism for social ownership of production, had a basis for unity with the peasantry in resolving the question dividing all of Peruvian society—the “Indian question.” Thus the “Indian question” was the key to the national question—the forging of a strong and united nation—and the alliance of workers and Indians was the key political instrument in resolving this question.

Mariátegui’s particular contribution to the analysis of the Indian question is to point up the central importance of property ownership; that is, this was seen as essentially a land question. It is bound up with the endurance of many aspects of precapitalist, feudal modes of production in the countryside, and the persistence of Indian traditions of communal ownership. This corresponded with the relative weakness of capitalism in Peru and the underdevelopment of its ruling class. Insofar as the consolidation of a Peruvian nation was necessarily linked to the development of capitalism, national formation was also stunted.

Mariátegui’s materialist analysis contrasts sharply with the classical liberal attempts to explain the Indian question simply in terms of racial or religious differences, or as an ideological remnant of colonial domination. Thus, Mariátegui asserted,

*The system of land ownership determines the political and administrative regime of all nations. The agrarian problem...dominates all our prob-
lems. Democratic and liberal institutions cannot prosper when based on a semi-feudal economy [1928: 53].

The agrarian problem is, above all, a problem of the elimination of feudalism in Peru. By now, this should have been carried out by the bourgeois democratic regime formally established in the revolution for independence. But in 100 years of the Republic in Peru, we have not had a genuine bourgeois class. . . . The old feudal class—camouflaged or dressed up as a Republican bourgeoisie—has maintained its positions [1928: 51].

Mariátegui does not limit his discussion to the semifeudal economy inherited from the Spanish, as do many criollo economists. He underlines the durability of the prefeudal relations of production, or "Indian communism." He points out that despite the dominance of the semifeudal property relations introduced by the Spanish during the colonial period, the Andean people continue to exercise various forms of association in production that approximate the ancient *ayllu*—a communistic formation based on sharing of the major means of production and distribution. "Communism," noted Mariátegui, "has continued to be the Indian's only defense" from exploitation (1928: 33). Mariátegui saw this enduring system of cooperation not as some quaint relic to be enshrined but, in typically political fashion, as a basis for winning over the indigenous population to the socialist revolution:

*Faith in an indigenous renaissance does not come from the process of "Westernization" . . . It is not the civilization and alphabet of the white man that raises the spirit of the Indian. It is the myth, the idea of socialist revolution [1928: 34].*

Starting with this assessment of the centrality of the Indian question, Mariátegui then goes on to demonstrate his thesis by taking on four national issues that were heatedly debated at the time, and very much the focus of the liberal and radical reform movements—education, religion, government decentralization, and literature. These movements inspired many of the activists and intellectuals who gravitated toward the socialist movement, seeking a more scientific analysis and strategy for social change. However, the spontaneous ideas fostered by the liberal reformers still exercised considerable influence within the revolutionary movement—as well as criollo chauvinism
that prevented the socialists from developing a truly national strategy and democratic program. Mariátegui established for the first time a clear alternative to both the dominant liberal thinking and the reactionary view of the oligarchy. It reflected the spontaneous radicalism of the student and workers’ movements and the discontent of the radicalized intelligentsia, which Mariátegui gave a Marxist foundation by grounding it in a concrete analysis of Peruvian history and political economy.

EDUCATION

Mariátegui rejected the feeble attempts at educational reform fostered by the liberal bourgeoisie on the grounds that they ignored the central problem—the educational impoverishment of the rural population, most sharply manifested in the dramatic illiteracy rate. “National education,” he stated, “. . . does not have a national spirit; instead it has the spirit of colonialism and the colonizer” (1928: 106). The liberal reforms of the day reflected the influence of North American pragmatism, the bourgeoisie’s answer to the feudal idealism so dearly cherished by the oligarchy. To both the liberal reforms and the traditional rigidity of the colonial system, Mariátegui counterposed the proletarian program. This included such important developments as the “Universidad Popular González Prada,” a progressive university at which he taught and served as rector. It included support for the student movement’s demands for genuine reforms abolishing the subservience and elitism that permeated the traditional education system. But above all, Mariátegui brought to these spontaneous alternatives a more profound objective—to lay the basis for a socialist Peru capable of implementing a truly national educational reform and liquidating rural backwardness.

RELIGION

Mariátegui attempted to go beyond the radical anticlericalism that enticed the fledgling proletariat, but whose logical social base was among the petty bourgeoisie. He also rejected the idealization of the Inca religion by demonstrating the material basis for religious beliefs in the economic relations of society, and the close connection between the state and religion. For Mariátegui, the problem was not organized
religion per se; religion was but a reflection of the economic and class relations within society. The problem was not the Catholic Church’s organic connection with the oligarchy ever since the conquest, as many liberals maintained, but the social order upon which the oligarchy rests.

Socialism... considers ecclesiastical forms and religious doctrines as particular to and inherent in the socioeconomic regime that produces and sustains them. And it is concerned with changing the latter and not the former. Socialism considers mere anticlerical agitation as a liberal bourgeois diversion [1928: 192].

GOVERNMENT DECENTRALIZATION

Peru is sharply divided into three distinct geographical and social areas—coast, sierra and jungle. The coast, especially the capital city of Lima, was the cradle of criollo culture and capitalism; the sierra, relatively isolated, was dependent—economically and politically—on the coastal cities; the jungle was still largely undeveloped and sparsely populated. The chief regional contradiction was between coast and sierra: “Coastal Peru, inheritor of Spain and the Conquest, dominates sierra Peru from Lima” (Mariátegui, 1928: 206). This testified to the incomplete formation of the Peruvian nation and the incapacity of both colonialism and capitalism to forge an economically and politically integrated nation, in which coast and sierra would both be integrated parts of a national whole.

In response to the divisions within Peru, and the increasingly dominant role of Lima, various proposals for “decentralization” were launched. Mariátegui criticized these reforms as centralist at heart, only aimed at tightening the control of the capital over the hinterlands, or relieving the central government of responsibility for financing local services. They were but superficial administrative shuffles that failed to address the central problem of the Indian question. Instead, Mariátegui insisted:

Beyond any formal triumph of decentralization and autonomy, lie the substantial demands of the Indian cause, inscribed in the vanguard’s revolutionary program [1928: 216].

In other words, the key to national integration and decentralization rested on the liberation of the rural population from poverty and
discrimination—a task neither the oligarchy nor the liberal reformers could carry out with their "decentralization" schemes. Only a powerful (centralized) system of revolutionary authority could carry out a successful decentralization program based on a policy of agrarian reform and national unity. (For an excellent discussion of this apparent paradox, see César Levano, 1969: 47-188.)

LITERATURE

In _Siete ensayos_, Mariátegui links the historical development of Peruvian literature with the nation's economic and social development: "The indigenous question, which is so pervasive in politics, economy and sociology, cannot be absent from literature and art" (1928: 328). He reviews colonial literature as an imported product devoid of any national spirit. Criollo culture "has not been able to prosper in our literature as a current with a national spirit first of all because the criollo does not yet represent our nationality" (Mariátegui, 1928: 330). The first steps toward a truly national literary expression were taken by the contemporaries who brought to the fore the central images of indigenous life—such as César Vallejo and Luis Valcárcel. These were the first spontaneous signs of a national consciousness, itself based on the economic transformation of Peruvian society. The earlier rebellion of urban nonconformists had an anticolonial spirit, but because it was apolitical it could not project a positive national alternative (this trend—"colónida"—included González Prada and Valdelomar). The new indigenista literature bore the first signs of a partisan and explicitly national stance, just as Mariátegui's analysis of literature was based, in his own words, on an "explicit revolutionary and socialist partisanship."

In sum, Mariátegui's _Siete ensayos_ is uncompromisingly partisan, yet devoid of any dogmatic tendency to repeat the generalities of socialist theory as a substitute for its creation. Mariátegui's work remains the seminal scientific work on modern Peruvian society precisely because it focuses on Peru's historical reality and brings Marxism to bear to explain it in all its originality and detail.

MARIÁTEGUI'S INTERNATIONALISM

Given the richness of Mariátegui's analysis of Peruvian society, it is not difficult to understand how he can be portrayed as merely
a nationalist or proponent of indigenous independence. However, if we are to take Mariátegui as a whole, it becomes obvious that his analysis of Peruvian reality is directly related to, and based on, a thoroughgoing internationalism. This can be demonstrated on several different levels.

First of all, Mariátegui’s maturity as a master of Peruvian reality paralleled his development as an internationalist. In his most productive years, he corresponded and collaborated with revolutionaries and revolutionary-minded intellectuals throughout the hemisphere, from Juan Marinello of Cuba to Waldo Frank in the United States. *Amauta* declared its solidarity with the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutionary movements and the successful Bolshevik Revolution. In other words, in addition to being at the center of the revolutionary current in Peru, he was also the principal conduit to the international movement.

Secondly, Mariátegui’s European experience, by his own admission, represented a turning point in his political development. Mariátegui witnessed the Italian and French working class in a period of dramatic development, in large part inspired by the Bolshevik victory. He began to comprehend the immense potential of the organized working class for transforming society. He also saw first hand the damaging effect of opportunism in the movement, and consistently united with the communist split from the Second International (for example, Mariátegui attended the 1921 founding congress of the Italian communists at Livorno). After his European experience, he returned to Peru determined to take up his internationalist responsibility and prepare the political and ideological terrain for the budding Peruvian socialist movement. As any serious internationalist, he understood Peruvian socialism could not be “a carbon copy” of European or Soviet socialism, but there is not a hint in his theory or practice that his quest for originality was based on a rejection of other experiences.

Third, Mariátegui’s adherence to the process of consolidating the international working-class movement around the political line of the Third International was fairly consistent. All attempts to infer political differences or underlying disaffection from the Third International, and Leninism, rely on trivial points, speculation or remote inference. For example, many have implied that Mariátegui’s preference for naming the organization of the Peruvian revolution “socialist” instead of “communist” reflects a principled difference over the vanguard party. To believe this, one only has to “forget” that Mariátegui explicitly rejected the multiclass party both in theory and practice when he rejected the Second International, APRA, and the revisionist theses.
they propounded. Or, as Jorge Falcón (1970: 56) has pointed out, "The discussion over the clothing has overlooked . . . the anatomy."

Another approach has been to try to prove that Mariátegui was moving away from the Comintern (the organization of the Third International) and toward a formal break with the international communist movement. The evidence for this argument revolves largely around Mariátegui's disagreements with the leadership of the Comintern at the 1929 Buenos Aires conference of Latin American communists. The dispute was over the Comintern's line calling for national self-determination for the Indian people, and the formation of an Indian republic out of portions of several South American nations. This was based on an overall framework that underestimated the extent to which nations had already developed in Latin America and failed to make any distinctions between Latin America and other regions of the former colonial world. The Comintern leadership at the conference equated the indigenous question in Latin America with the national question in Europe and the Soviet Union. In fact, however, the indigenous people of Latin America had never constituted a separate nation, and 400 years of colonial domination made the Latin American continent one of the most developed—in capitalist terms—within the colonial world. Finally, Peru's collectivist traditions were not the same as those of feudal Europe.

Mariátegui and the Peruvian delegation opposed the Comintern leadership at the conference and insisted that its position had no basis in the history and contemporary reality of Latin America. The Peruvians instead struggled for a conception of the indigenous question that placed the Indian regions in the context of the development of the existing nations in Latin America—and their transformation into socialist nations.

Mariátegui's differences with the Comintern representatives at this conference were therefore important ones. However, there is no basis for leaping from the conference to the conclusion of Mariátegui's defection from communism. In the first place, the debate over Indian nations did not represent at that time, nor has it since, a major line of demarcation within Latin American communism. Secondly, there were many dubious positions coming out of the Comintern during this period including many, like the one on Indian nations, that have long since been dropped. Finally, no matter how secondary this debate was in the broader historical sense, the fact of the matter is that Mariátegui never once gave any indication—either during or after the con-
ference—that he was reevaluating his internationalist commitment. All attempts to prove that Mariátegui was so inclined are based on inferences and speculation, not on fact.  

All of the attempts to imply a tilt by Mariátegui away from the communist movement correspond with efforts to separate Mariátegui’s theories from Leninism. Perhaps the boldest effort has been sponsored by APRA, which has tried to appropriate El Amauta (with some provisos) as their own (Chang-Rodríguez, 1983). To do this, the Apristas have to overlook Mariátegui’s decisive break with Haya de la Torre in 1928 when the latter moved to found a Peruvian party based on social democratic principles and the middle class, in direct opposition to the principles of the Third International, as well as the polemics that preceded this break.

Mariátegui’s theoretical bonds with Leninism have been well documented elsewhere (Choy et al., 1970; Luna Vegas, 1978; Del Prado, 1972). These are evident not only in his direct allusions to Lenin and the Russian Revolution, but in his fundamental adherence to the Leninist theories of imperialism, the state, and the party. Mariátegui did not simply nod approval of Lenin, but in his own analyses of imperialism, the state and party verified the same revolutionary principles that Lenin had come to. Like Lenin, Mariátegui applied the existing body of Marxist theory to the concrete conditions in his own country and took into account the qualitative changes that capitalism underwent with the emergence of imperialism in the twentieth century. He also concluded that socialism would not be possible without a qualitative transformation of the state under working-class direction and a revolution led by the most advanced elements of the proletariat.

In sum, a comprehensive picture of Mariátegui leads to the inescapable conclusion that his ability to pierce the essence of Peruvian reality, and intervene in it in a decisive way, is inextricably bound up with his internationalist posture. His internationalism gave him the confidence that the Peruvian revolution was but one component of a broad historical process; his European experience brought home to him the political capacity of a mature proletariat, the terrible consequences of opportunism in the working-class movement, the significance of the struggle against fascism, and the need to forge broad democratic fronts. He could see that Peru’s working class was still in its earliest stages of development, an understanding crucial to his own commitment to party building. Mariátegui was struck by the contrasts between Europe and Latin America and never tried to apply mechanically the ex-
periences of European history to Peru; on the contrary, he focused on the particularities of the Peruvian class struggle—its economic backwardness, undeveloped national formation, the centrality of the Indian question, the precapitalist elements in production. Despite the obvious parallels between Peru and Italy, a country also divided into two distinct geoeconomic zones (the industrially developed urban North and the impoverished rural South), Mariátegui never argued by analogy, but instead analyzed the concrete Peruvian situation. This was not a sign of any "creative" or "Peruvian" Marxism; it was one of the first applications of Marxism to the concrete conditions in Latin America during the age of imperialism—that is, an application and development of Leninism.

An exchange between Haya de la Torre and Mariátegui in 1928, cited by César Levano in his "Lenin y Mariátegui en Nuestro Tiempo" (1970: 168-169), is revealing. Haya protests against Mariátegui's constant attempts to pose the Peruvian revolution as part of an international revolutionary process, and his identification with the revolutionary process in Europe and the Soviet Union. Haya wanted to limit the Peruvian revolution to the project of national democratic reform. "We will make the revolution without mentioning socialism," he said, "but instead by distributing the land and struggling against imperialism." To which Mariátegui responded: "We are revolutionaries because we are Marxists, because against capitalism we pose socialism as an antagonistic system destined to succeed it." Thus, Mariátegui's national revolution was seen as an integral part of the international process of proletarian liberation from the yoke of capitalism.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this article has been to summarize the contributions of José Carlos Mariátegui to revolutionary theory in general, particularly in Latin America. I have only touched on some of the numerous debates surrounding Mariátegui that have assumed a growing significance in recent years as his work has become a reference point in the struggles for national independence and socialism. However, given that Mariátegui's theories themselves emerged in the heat of an intense ideological struggle among revolutionary-minded forces, they can really be understood only in that context. Mariátegui's main contributions to revolutionary theory, which we have tried to summarize,
must be seen in the light of a wider process of establishing a political and ideological foundation for socialism in Latin America. This required the development of conscious forces within society, based in the working-class and peasant movements, grounded with an internationalist perspective and a clear political understanding of the national democratic struggle. While Mariátegui understood that the twentieth century was, in objective terms, the age of imperialism and socialism—in this he agreed with Lenin—he also understood that revolution could not happen without the decisive role of the conscious element. In this he also agreed with Lenin.

The present day significance of Mariátegui is therefore not just his brilliant analysis of Peruvian society, but his approach, his method, and above all his dedication to strengthening the conscious forces who had to address the task of changing that society. At a time when the Latin American revolutionary movement is renewing its capacity for conscious leadership, with a renewed ideological struggle, El Amauta has many lessons to offer.

Among Latin America’s revolutionary forces, Mariátegui has a special significance at present. The communist movement in Latin America is undergoing an intense process of struggle and reevaluation of its line and practice over the last several decades, spurred by the reality that the “official” communist parties were not the central forces leading the two successful revolutions—Cuba and Nicaragua (Bollinger, forthcoming; Chervonni, 1984). Mariátegui represents a common reference point to which all revolutionaries can turn in the attempt to rectify past weaknesses. For communists, he represents the cardinal importance of grounding revolutionary practice in the most advanced theory, the defense of revolutionary Marxism, and the repudiation of dogmatic and sectarian substitutes for Marxist orthodoxy. Outside the communist movement, he is a luminary because he unravelled the complex relationship between national liberation and the concrete conditions of oppression under which the Latin American masses survive. As a leading intellectual, he waged the ideological struggle against the cultural and intellectual czars of proimperialist liberalism. He was able to synthesize the national democratic aspirations of Latin America with the international socialist movement that flourished in Europe and the Soviet Union. He coupled his conviction that the peasant question was central to the revolutionary project with a firm defense of the leading role of the proletariat in affecting the transition to socialism.
NOTES

1. APRA stands for the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana, founded in 1924 by Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre as a broad, Latin American revolutionary, anti-imperialist formation. In 1928, Haya de la Torre established APRA as a strictly Peruvian party (the Partido Aprista Peruano) and by the 1940s it shifted to a reformist strategy based on populism and a petty-bourgeois class base.

2. Del Prado is currently General Secretary of the Peruvian Communist party and one of the foremost authorities on Mariátegui in the communist movement. Although it is not within the scope of this article to demonstrate this, I believe Del Prado’s defense of Mariátegui’s Marxism-Leninism is both important and politically correct, but suffers from a dogmatic methodology that relies heavily on textual citations to “prove” Mariátegui’s doctrinal orthodoxy rather than a theoretical examination of Mariátegui’s ideas in their own right from the point of view of historical and dialectical materialism. Alternatively, Del Prado often relies on personal anecdotes to make his case rather than a systematic theoretical and political analysis of Mariátegui.

3. This goes far beyond Mariátegui’s explicit critique of the economistic theories that he was aware of in Peru and his forceful rejection of European social democracy. Indeed, all of Mariátegui’s work is implicitly a repudiation of the stale, economistic interpretation of Marx that reduced the struggle for socialism to a series of economic struggles for higher wages and better working conditions. Coming as it did in the decade following the Bolshevik Revolution, Mariátegui’s work objectively upheld the reaffirmation of the Leninist principles underlying the seizure of power in Russia, which were attacked throughout the world as either only applicable to Russia or inconsistent with proletarian interests to begin with.

4. Mariátegui’s position parallels in many ways Lenin’s views on the mir—a form of rural collectivism common in Russia at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution. Mariátegui, like Lenin, also rejected the idea that the persistence of such precapitalist forms necessitated a lengthy period of capitalist development as a “prerequisite” for socialism—as social democracy and Bukharin’s followers in the Soviet Union maintained—but instead considered them as a foundation for the transition to socialism. It might be argued that because today the ayllu is but a remnant of the past and the majority of Peru’s rural population are either small property owners or rural proletarians, or a combination of both, and because only 40% of Peru’s population is strictly rural, the agrarian question is therefore no longer—if it ever was—a central one. This argument, however, must rely on a strictly quantitative approach to class analysis and fails to take into account the qualitative way in which the indigenous question continues to dominate all Peruvian politics—urban and rural. It requires that one overlook the relatively tenuous hold of capitalist relations even in urban areas and the continual emergence of new forms of cooperation and indigenous consciousness, despite the obvious process of integration in the imperialist system most clearly felt in the metropolitan centers. The persistence of this question explains, in part, the insurgency of Sendero Luminoso (the “Shining Path” guerrillas which, though based in the isolated Ayacucho region, have managed to stir sympathies throughout the nation). However, failing to take the materialist approach that Mariátegui followed so assiduously, Sendero has chosen to completely ignore the process of transformation of the Peruvian countryside in the twentieth century—in particular the sweeping agrarian reform of the Velasco era.
(1968-1975)—and acts as if Peru was still a nation of Incas occupied by the Spanish.

5. The Second International was a formation of socialist and workers’ parties, mostly based in Europe. It was divided first of all over the question of World War I. One section, led by Karl Kautsky, left the door open for the individual parties in each country to support their own nation’s role in the war. The section led by Lenin and the Bolshevik Party called for workers to oppose the war as an imperialist one in which the working class could only become cannon fodder defending their “own” bourgeoisies. Later, the decisive split in the Second International occurred over support for the Bolshevik Revolution. The Kautsky section withheld its support on the basis that the revolution was not democratic. The Bolsheviks spearheaded the organization of the Third International, based on defense of the Bolshevik Revolution and the consolidation of a revolutionary wing of the worker’s movement in Europe and internationally. By 1921, this split had resulted in the formation of separate parties in most European nations—with the reformist parties adhering to the Second (Socialist) International and the revolutionary parties adhering to the Third (Communist) International.

6. Some historians have tried to speculate that Mariátegui was preparing to drop out of the communist movement just before his death; the “evidence” for this is that he was planning a trip to Argentina, sponsored not by the communist movement but aided by two noncommunist intellectuals. The purpose of the trip is not clear. But aside from the purely speculative nature of this argument, it ignores one important logical explanation for Mariátegui’s reliance on noncommunists for assistance: at a time of heightened repression of communists in Peru and throughout Latin America, help from noncommunists in such a venture would have been much more reliable than assistance from communists.

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