

**‘Latin American Marxism’ at the crisscross of two cultural zones:  
the Andean and the River Plate**

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Since its origins by the early 1980s, the field of studies ‘Latin American Marxism’ has suffered the paradoxes of its own status. At the verge of its own constitution amid the rising of cultural studies’ interdisciplinary wave, the works of José Aricó, Oscar Teran, Robert Paris, Juan Carlos Portantiero, Michael Löwy, Osvaldo Fernández, César Germaná, René Zavaleta Mercado and Raúl Fonet-Betancourt (to name only a few well-known authors of the field) have given account of historical Marxism in Latin America from the standpoint of its either ‘external’ or ‘internal’ relation to the continent. Given this standpoint, the main focus has been placed in the connections between Marxism and the problem of the nation, along with concomitances between theoretical achievements and nationalist (national-popular or otherwise) left-wing projects. Insofar as cultural studies can be in part understood as the destabilization of the category of nation (along with that of class), it becomes understandable the problems that the idea of ‘Latin American Marxism’ has acquired within this intellectual climate.

In my work, taking off from the achievements of this field of studies I have set out the task of giving a more nuanced account of the intellectual Marxist tradition in Latin America. My hypothesis is that Marxism in this sub-continent poses a history not easily reducible to its proximity with left-wing national projects, and hence cannot be reduced to another theory of modernization and development – this is the main criticism casted to it by the Latin American ‘branch’ of postcolonialism, namely decolonial thought. From such a hypothesis, I attempt to reconstruct the thought of the most original Marxist thinkers in the continent, from José Carlos Mariátegui (1920s) and Aníbal Ponce (1930s) to José Revueltas (1950s and 60s) to José Aricó and the intellectual exile in Mexico (1970s) to Bolívar Echeverría (1980s and 90s) to Álvaro García Linera (1990s up to this day). Theoretical in scope, this thesis needs an in-depth understanding of the economic, social and cultural conjunctures from which Marxist thought has been brought about; in this sense, the SRA fellowship has been enormously helpful for me to be able to visit two of the three main cultural zones taken up in my work, that is, the Andean and the River Plate – being the third Mexico.

José Carlos Mariátegui is widely known as the ‘First Marxist of America’. Born in 1894 in a small town near Lima, self-taught and with a health condition which accompanied him since he was a child (eventually leading him to death in 1930), during the 1920s Mariátegui achieved the status of one of the most important and singular Marxist writers and organisers. His two masterpieces-works were *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality* (published in 1928) and *Revista Amauta*, founded in 1926 and closed after his death in 1930. *Revista Amauta* is still to-day considered one of the most impressive journals for the Latin American Marxist tradition. In the same vein, Mariátegui is considered the most important Marxist Latin America has ever seen, in part because of his non-orthodox considerations on the Indian and national questions.

In particular, from an understanding of Marxism which does not reduce it to a ready-made theory to be ‘applied’ to Peru or elsewhere, Mariátegui discovered the ‘Indian’ (el *indio*) as the ‘primary

problem of Perú' insofar as the Indigenous condition compresses the most imperative problems of the national – namely, pre-capitalist servitude and proto-capitalist forms of wage labour, social and cultural concealing from official discourses, and still-alive communitarian forms of life, customs and beliefs. The latter were considered by Mariátegui as crucial elements for building up a socialist project in Indo America. Hence his interventions in the Marxist realm of the period were driven by a renewed and deep understanding of particular historical conditions for the alliance of workers and 'the peasants' (somehow a misleading category in the Marxist tradition).

Mariátegui achieved an enriched comprehension of his age, and can thus be set into dialogue not only with relevant Marxist debates of the 1920s in which Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Gramsci and Bukharin (to name only the most prominent of the list) played a role, but also and foremost with today contemporaneous currents dealing with postcolonial condition, uneven economic, social and cultural development, and the problem of different historical temporalities under capitalist rule. To do so, nonetheless, implies to look into the historical conjuncture Mariátegui was active part of, as well as to reconstruct in a certain degree the intellectual influences and the 'translations' such conceptualisations underwent in the process of its incorporation into Latin American debates and uses –Marxism the first of them, but also vitalism, psychoanalyses, artistic avant-gardes, pragmatism, and still others.

On the other hand, Aníbal Ponce was the most important figure of Marxism in Argentina during the 1930s. Ponce constitutes a type of intellectual more closely related to Marxist orthodoxy, and nonetheless his works on Argentinean cultural formation are central to grasp the differences between Latin American Marxism's two zones of influences I'm proposing here. From a liberal and positivist legacy highly influenced by the Argentinian tradition from Domingo F. Sarmiento to José Ingenieros, Ponce became a Marxist around 1930-1932, once the 1929's economic crack shattered Argentina's economy, and political bourgeois reaction to labour movements in Europe and overseas was increasing. In *Education and Class Struggle* (1934) he declares for bourgeoisie to be no longer a factor of progress but an obstacle for it, something clear in the fact that this class has dropped out the humanist and rationalist values carried in its 'progressive' epoch.

Despite his strong support to anti-imperialist policies of the period, Ponce was not engaged with themes of Latinamericanism (as Mariátegui did), holding rather an 'abstract cosmopolitanism' on the matter of revolutionary class struggles. And nevertheless it is possible to find the disclosure of the 'problem of the nation' in his late texts, written during the exile in Mexico between 1936 and the fatal traffic accident he suffered in 1938. These texts deal precisely with the Indian conditions of life and the presence-in-concealing of such social actor within Mexican landscape –and by extension in the rest of Latin America. For some scholars, Ponce highlights the frequent relation of 'exteriority' between Marxism and the social struggles in Latin America; such account, however, should be nuanced by regarding the actual social and political configuration he lived in and to which he tried to give answer.

From the research conducted with the SRA grant, I will be able to construct a more complete picture of Peruvian, Argentinian and Bolivian left-wing traditions, Marxism included. Important to this regard was my trip to Bolivia, where I could realize the enormous synthesis between Marxism and 'Indianism' produced nowadays through the 'process of change' (*proceso de cambio*) headed by Evo Morales and Álvaro García Linera. Since the latter is the main author of my thesis' last chapter, it is

crucial for me to give a complete outlook of the achievements of this process not only in social and economic dimensions but also in theoretical terms, that is, to give account of the polemics, internal criticisms and conceptual and practical challenges this original synthesis is producing and encouraging. The reconstruction of Marxist reflections I'm proposing will serve thus for a more accurate consideration of the historicity of this theory's continuities and discontinuities during the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to-day.