Introduction

Mariátegui, Critical Thinking, and Andean Futures

by

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As we move well beyond the optimism of the left turn in Latin America that began in 2000 and ended (at least temporarily) around 2015 (with the end of the commodities price boom and the defeat of progressive Peronism in Argentina), we have to find ways to reconnect critical thinking with the need to reconstruct hegemony across the broad masses to create a better future. We base this enterprise in the Andean region, where two countries (Bolivia and Ecuador) have had an intense experience with leftist regimes/movements and in two others (Peru and Colombia) the left has recently come to power (Peru) or has mounted a serious challenge to the existing order (Colombia).

Our analysis starts with a recovery and renewal of the thinking and practice of the Peruvian/Nuestra América figure of José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930) a socialist and labor organizer who set out to “Latin-Americanize” Marx and make him fit for purpose in a continent that he misunderstood so badly. As Fernanda Beigel (2019: 11) has argued recently, Mariátegui “should be considered the founding father of Latin American Studies” for his pioneering role in the analysis of the structural heterogeneity of the Latin American social formation and in particular his contribution to the study of “race.” His work was at the intersection of scientific research and political practice. His Marxism was never just “applied” but translated into a methodology that was appropriate to the recalcitrant reality of Latin America and geared always to the achievement of what he called “practical socialism.”

Mariátegui’s classic Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana (Mariátegui, 1997 [1928]) represents an original engagement with Peruvian social, economic, political, and cultural reality in the period leading up to the crisis and transition of 1930. The 1920s saw a series of upheavals amongst the indigenous peoples of Peru that shaped or rather reshaped Mariátegui’s political vision for change. This was also, of course, the period when the great Mexican Revolution was coming to the close of its most active phase. Far away, in Russia, the October Revolution of 1917 brought onto the world scene a new world-historical subject, the proletariat, and a bold ideology for social transformation, Leninism.

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Mariátegui, during this tumultuous period, laid the foundations in his writings and political practice for an original and critical Marxist understanding of Latin America that is receiving renewed attention in a continent at the forefront of conflict and change. In his short but very active and influential career Mariátegui was a labor organizer, an exile in Europe, a radical journalist, and a leader of the emerging Latin American communist movement. His early career as a journalist shaped his crisp, unpretentious writing style and led him to support the revolutionary demands of students and workers around 1917. In 1919 the dictator Augusto Leguía sent Mariátegui into exile; he went first to France, where he met Romain Rolland and Henri Barbusse, but then soon after to Italy, where he witnessed the mobilization of the landmark Turin workers’ councils of 1919 and the founding of the Italian Communist Party in 1921.

Returning to Peru as a committed Marxist, he threw himself into worker education (through the emerging democratic nationalist leader Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre) and in 1926 founded the influential journal Amauta, dedicated to critical ideas in all spheres of life. In 1928 he launched the Partido Socialista Perúano (Peruvian Socialist Party—PSP), serving as its first secretary general, and published his main work, the Siete ensayos. The PSP was a broad-based socialist party (with a communist core) that went on to organize the Central General de Trabajadores del Perú (Peruvian General Workers’ Central—CGTP) to mobilize and lead the workers’ movement. Mariátegui’s Marxism was what we might call a “warm” one, far removed from the scientific pretensions of the analytical and theoretical Marxisms (including a somewhat dogmatic reading of the French political philosopher Louis Althusser) that dominated in Latin America during the 1970s. His whole rationale was one of practical engagement with the lives of workers and indigenous peasants. He was never a follower either of what some called a Leninist “theoretical practice” or of the theoretical preoccupations of what later became known as “Western Marxism.”

Far from grandiose or general ideas, he focused his energies on social transformation as a result of popular practices and traditions. Rejecting all forms of a “class essentialism” that would reduce all life to its class origins, Mariátegui focused on the broad emancipatory potential of social, popular, and ethnic social forces. He represented an early Marxist engagement with the situation and aspirations of the Amerindian peoples, breaking with his own early, quite orthodox socialism in a European frame. He began to focus on the land question as the main underlying factor in Amerindian subjection. Above all, he argued—against all forms of paternalism—that the liberation of the Amerindian peoples was a matter for themselves. His analysis was based on an early critique of Marxist and mainstream theories based on a “dualism” between country and city, advanced and backward sectors of the economy, holding that they were in dialectical unity and that the path of social transformation needed to be conceived holistically. Mariátegui is extremely contemporary again today in his analysis of the “indigenous communist economy” and even the “agrarian communism” of the ayllu (Inca community) and the principles of reciprocity and redistribution of wealth characteristic of these early communists. Their habits of cooperation and solidarity and their “communist spirit” were, for Mariátegui, harbingers of the socialist transformation required in Peru and Latin America more broadly.
The various contributions below may lead us to a better understanding of the relevance of Mariátegui today, particularly from a social movement perspective. The opening piece by Ronaldo Munck is a broad review of the various phases of Mariátegui’s short career focusing on the way his particular political methodology was forged. He comes across as a complex political figure at once opposed to Eurocentrism and thoroughly modernist, both an advocate of “Peruvianizing Peru” and a firm internationalist. He is seen to provide an opportunity for the revival of a critical Andean Marxism.

Mariátegui’s engagement with feminism is traced below by Joana das Flores Duarte, who shows that his political and cultural frame was heavily influenced by the feminism of the Russian Revolution period and prominent figures such as Alexandra Kollontai and Nadezhda Krupskaya. This perspective was based on the then-current Marxist orthodoxy that women’s incorporation into the paid labor force would transform gender relations. Today, as a new wave of feminism sweeps Latin America, it is vital to return to Mariátegui’s pioneering articulation of Marxist and feminist thinking.

Félix Pablo Friggeri focuses on how Mariátegui sought to construct the proletariat as a new revolutionary subject in both political and epistemological terms. Pointing to the historical-structural heterogeneity of Latin America, he sought ways to articulate the making of the working class and the construction of the Peruvian nation. This contribution asks how his thinking might today help enrich and better articulate the struggle for an alternative rationality of empowerment by the working classes across Latin America.

Patricia Pensado and Nayeli Camacho explore Mariátegui’s impact on the peasant struggles in Peru and in particular through the mobilizations led by Hugo Blanco in the early 1960s in the valleys of La Convención and Lares in Cusco. Once again, as in Mariátegui’s period of the 1920s, peasant revolts became a major force for transformation and resulted in the 1969 agrarian reform. Blanco’s Trotskyist affiliation is well known (see Blanco, 1972), but this contribution also brings out his strong intellectual and political affiliation with Mariátegui, who provided him with many guiding principles.

Mauricio Jaramillo Jassir then calls our attention to Mariátegui’s analysis of indigenous struggles and the relevance of this thinking today. Mariátegui grounded his Marxism in the complex indigenous reality of Peru and refused to simply extrapolate the European communist tradition to Latin America. This contribution focuses on the long-standing, often silent collaboration between indigenous activists and the various communist tendencies in Peru, which has helped create a powerful movement, part of the broad left in which classist and indigenous strands compete for influence.

Curtis Kline explores the possible synergies between the thinking of Mariátegui and the European “open Marxism” tradition. In the post-1968 Marxist revival, “open Marxism” came to symbolize a radical tradition that rejected structuralism and positivism, dogmatism, and an uncritical reception of Marx. Mariátegui had, much earlier, come to similar conclusions and always saw Marxism as anything but a rigid and closed system. As did all forms of Eurocentric thinking, European “open Marxism” ignored the contribution of Mariátegui, and this article seeks to redress that deficit.
Next Adriane Vieira Ferrarini and César Salinas Ramos explore the parallels between Mariátegui’s thinking and the theory and practice of the solidarity or popular economy (see Manriquez, Martínez, and Colin-Castillo, 2017) as an alternative to the status quo. Similarly to the way in which Mariátegui “Latin-Americanized” Marxist theories, the solidary or solidarity economy movement in Latin America grounded the European cooperativist tradition in its own social reality. Given the failures of the state, it is the excluded sectors that themselves have had to build cooperation from the bottom up. This tradition can be seen to renew the struggle for socialism in a particular context in the same way that Mariátegui reached back to precolonial forms of social solidarity.

Finally, in this section Marc Becker takes us into the Comintern archives to follow how the communist movement continued to engage with the “indigenous question” after the death of Mariátegui in 1930. Situating them in their context, Becker introduces two previously unpublished documents that show the communist tradition seeking to better grasp the relationship between class and ethnicity reflected today in the divide between clasisita and indigenista strands within the indigenous social movements of Latin America. Long before “intersectionality” became a fashionable frame in academia, we see the militant communist tradition seeking to better understand these relationships the better to contest the dominant order.

We then move on to take up the critical thinking of some other influential Andean thinkers: René Zavaleta Mercado (Bolivia, 1937–1984), Agustín Cueva (Ecuador, 1937–1992), and Orlando Fals Borda (Colombia, 1925–2008), who, in different but, we could argue, complementary ways, help us develop an Andean decolonial problematic and praxis. This section consists of articles by Tomás Torres López and J. Fabián Cabaluz Ducasse on the thinking of Zavaleta Mercado and García Linera (on whom see Garcia Linera, 2014), by Nayeli Burgueño Angulo and Carlos Alberto Ramírez Díaz on Cueva, with whom Burgueño studied, and by Juan Mario Díaz-Arévalo and Álex Pereira on different aspects, notably religion and nonbinary methods, of the thinking of Fals Borda. To situate these contributions we need to provide some general background on these theorists/activists, who are not very well known across Latin America, let alone in the English-speaking world.

Zavaleta Mercado coined the term sociedad abigarrada (imperfectly translated as “motley or variegated society”), which has never been explored sufficiently as a lens for understanding contemporary Latin America. He also made a huge contribution to our understanding of the “national-popular” and stressed the importance of the autonomy of the political. Cueva was an early dependency theorist, an astute observer of the changes in the working class and the importance of the concept of “multitude,” and an original theorist of democracy. Fals Borda was of course the originator (not always acknowledged in the North) of participatory action research and the notion of subaltern decolonial epistemologies but also a close and acute observer of the Andean peasantry. We argue that, separately and collectively, these thinkers should be recovered and rethought from a critical perspective in terms of the current situation in the Andean countries and the alternative futures now opening up.

René Zavaleta Mercado is probably one of the most original political thinkers to emerge after Mariátegui. His academic formation was at the Universidad
de San Andrés in La Paz and later the University of Oxford, and he became the director of the Facultad Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales (Latin American Social Sciences Institute—FLACSO) in Mexico. He began his political career as a militant in the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (Revolutionary Nationalist Movement—MNR) of Bolivia and participated in the 1952 revolution, later becoming minister of mines for the new nationalist government. The Banzer coup saw him forced into exile in 1971 and then again after the Pinochet coup in 1973 in Chile, from which he left for Mexico, as did many others of that generation. He left the MNR for the Partido Comunista Boliviano (Bolivian Communist Party—PCB) and for a time his work showed an orthodox Marxist inflection. Later, in Mexico, he was hugely influenced by the renewed interest in Gramsci at the time, encouraged by Southern Cone exiles such as José Aricó. It was then that he launched an extremely original train of thought.

As against Marx’s mistaken view of Bolívar as a pale imitation of Napoleon III (see Aricó, 2013), Zavaleta Mercado showed that the state was primordial in the building of the nation in Latin America. His most creative concept was that of the above-mentioned sociedad abigarrada. The heterogeneous society of Bolivia needed a theoretical frame that recognized its specificity—its multiethnic and multilingual nature. This society and its state were not homogeneous but torn in different directions—hybrid at their very core. The Western notion of civil society was inadequate to describe and analyze them, given the multiple societies in which capitalist and noncapitalist labor and juridical forms coexisted. Luis Tapia (2002: 10), in introducing Zavaleta Mercado, defines abigarramiento social as “the layering of diverse types of society that coexist in a disarticulated manner, establishing relations of domination of one over others and distortion.” Clearly this conceptualization considerably stretches the traditional Marxist framework and allows for a deeper and more complex understanding of the Bolivian social formation.

A central feature in Zavaleta Mercado’s writings was the role of the subject, and we have a series of very creative engagements with the nature of the working classes and the popular masses in a country like Bolivia that prefigures more recent concerns with the “social worker” and the “multitude” (see Hardt and Negri, 2000). Likewise, there is an acute understanding of the national-popular dimension of politics in Latin America that never falls into clichéd or formulaic thinking. Zavaleta Mercado’s thinking is set in the mold of Georg Lukács (1968), who saw Marxism as a methodology rather than a firm set of beliefs. After an initial more orthodox or conformist phase, his Marxism was derived from political practice and was always very open and flexible. He was able to bridge the gap creatively between, for example, the local and the universal (Mariátegui was also very adept at this), between revolutionary nationalism and Marxism, and between the national and the state domains. He was in a constant dialogue with history and always reflexive and self-critical. Above all, he was always oriented to the positive proposal (propositivo) and did not tolerate pessimism or inaction.

In this issue Tomás Torres López and J. Fabián Cabaluz Ducasse take up the relevance of Zavaleta Mercado today in dialogue with the critical Marxism of Álvaro García Linera, which has also sought to produce novel categories for the analysis of contemporary Bolivia. Both thinkers are seen to have adapted
Marxist categories to the specific historical conditions of Latin America. As did Mariátegui’s, their work rejects all forms of economism and economic determinism and foregrounds agency (people’s ability to act autonomously), as is clear from their involvement in practical politics, and looks to the past for anti-capitalist reference points for the future.

Agustín Cueva began as a member of the early Latin American dependency theory cohort but from a distinctive Ecuadorian perspective. His main works were *El desarrollo del capitalismo en América Latina* (Cueva, 1977), *El proceso de dominación política en Ecuador* (Cueva, 1972), and *Literatura y conciencia histórica en América Latina* (Cueva, 1993), none of which was ever translated into English. His formation as a political scientist was at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador and the École des Hautes Études Sociales in France. Back in Ecuador as head of sociology at the Universidad Central del Ecuador, he was forced into exile by the Velasco Ibarra *autogolpe* of 1970, which led to the shutdown of his university and exile first in Chile and then in Mexico. Cueva was always a quite orthodox Marxist, scorning the new concerns of the 1980s around globalization and governance or sustainability and democracy, which he considered in some way diversions. The struggle for democracy meant little, he argued, without a clear class content. His was a Marxist humanism characterized by a certain pessimism.

Cueva’s abiding interest in critically tracking the politics of Ecuador was a constant in his work and probably his enduring contribution. The engagement with dependency led him into sharp conflict with Theotônio dos Santos and Vânia Bambirra, whose analysis he considered somewhat mechanical and nondialectical in its rendering of the relationship between capitalism, the world market, and the internal class dynamic in Latin America. He also said that dependency existed in an unclear or undefined space between Marxism and *desarrollismo* (developmentalism). This was a debate within the left, and he never joined the conservative critique of dependency theory. Following Mariátegui directly, he stressed the organic relationship between the bourgeoisie and the landowners,. He pointed to the need to “nationalize” Marxism and engage with the national-popular while holding firmly to a quite traditional version of historical materialism. Cueva was very critical of the neo-Gramscian current emerging in the 1980s and considered it a move toward social democracy.

This last point is important because it colored his response to the 1980s Mariátegui revival through the work of José Aricó, a leading Gramscian who had broken away from orthodox communism (see Aricó, 1980). In a review of Latin American Marxism, Cueva argued that “for the Andean people of my generation and the previous one, Mariátegui was never an unknown. . . . In the 1940s and 1950s *Siete ensayos* was already a classic” (Cueva, 2008: 180). Cueva basically thought that Mariátegui was not a profound Marxist theorist, although his writing did help introduce the concept of mode of production into later debates. There is an echo in Cueva’s writing of the early communist minimizing of Mariátegui’s legacy. Cueva was most exercised over the view of critics of official communism that the period between 1930 (the death of Mariátegui) and 1959 (the Cuban Revolution) was one of stagnation in Marxist theory (see, e.g., Löwy, 1992). It is in this context that we can understand his attack on Aricó, of
whom he said that he seemed more engaged with “the meanderings of European debates” than with the real concerns of Mariátegui, “as though he were making an effort to translate the language of the ‘blancos’ into the sui-generis discourse of the Peruvian ‘cholo’” (Cueva, 2008: 181).

Nayeli Burgueño Angulo and Carlos Alberto Ramírez Díaz review Cueva’s work from his early critiques from an orthodox Marxist perspective of the dependency approach to the work on the dictatorships and the democratic period that followed. Cueva stressed that the fragility of democracy in the region and its very clear limits within a capitalist context pointed to the need to deepen democracy and promote the structural transformation of society to meet the needs of the people.

Orlando Fals Borda began his university studies in the United States, obtaining his Ph.D. from the University of Florida in 1955 under Nelson Lowry (author of Rural Cuba), and when his dissertation was published as Campesinos de los Andes (Fals Borda, 1955) it was praised by Eric Wolf. Fals Borda was committed to the development of a “scientific sociology” and adopted the dominant structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons and others. He took this approach back to Colombia and was asked to set up a sociology department at the Universidad Nacional, to which he recruited the young priest Camilo Torres among others. He was dean of faculty between 1959 and 1967, continuing his research on the Colombian peasantry but also on issues of the day such as La Violencia (the virtual civil war between Liberals and Conservatives), the education system, and the prospects for community action. His major work of this period was La subversión en Colombia: Visión del cambio social en la historia (Fals Borda, 1967; 1969), in which he began to deploy his later-famous bottom-up methodology of participatory action research, through which peasants and other subaltern groups were given voice. La subversión was dedicated to his close collaborator Camilo Torres, who was killed in a confrontation with the army soon after he joined the guerrilla movement in 1966. Fals Borda was beginning his shift from scientific to committed sociology

La subversión was criticized by Stanislav Andrevski in his provocative Social Science as Sorcery as a “mixture of watered-down marxism and a patchy parsonianism [Parsons’s structural functionalism]” (Andrevski, 1975: 77). While unkind, this judgment was not without foundation in that Fals Borda never developed a historical materialist frame of analysis and continued to use Parsons’s jargon even after his views became radicalized. Likewise, his method of bottom-up investigation and participatory action research has been criticized for its empty rhetoric and its neglect of the politics of social transformation, which is reduced to consciousness raising.

Fals Borda eventually left his university position in 1968, at first temporarily and then permanently, to work with social movements in what we might call a Freireian mode, learning from them as he began to uncover their lives and aspirations. Products of this period are Historia de la cuestión agraria en Colombia (Fals Borda, 1975) and Historia doble de la Costa (Fals Borda, 1986), the latter reviewed in great detail by Álex Pereira in this issue. He was not a Marxist as he declared himself to be but was certainly a democratic socialist, albeit one influenced by the anarchist philosophy of Kropotkin and his politics of “mutual aid” in particular. In the 1980s he began to preach the virtues of social
movements above the party form. For him “a critical attitude toward parties performs the important function of demystifying them, understanding that parties are not the only possible forms through which to organize political action, that they become a negative factor when hierarchies and top-down politics prevail” (Fals Borda, 1989: 63). Political parties, in his view, could lead to violence, corruption, and abuse of power, a not unreasonable assumption in Colombia at that time.

However, he did become a member of the constituent assembly in 1990 on behalf of M-19. He was a member of a number of left fronts, including Camilo Torres’s Frente Unido and the Movimiento Firmes led by his friend Gerardo Molina, and became honorary president of the Polo Democrático in 2005. A long way from his U.S. university training now, Fals Borda railed against intellectual colonialism and echoed some of the themes of the bueno vivir (living well) that was then emerging as an opposition discourse in the Andean region. He thought that the community should be at the center of political life and wanted a return to the ayllu much as Mariátegui had argued. His was a mystical politics based on desire with more than a hint of utopianism.

In this issue Juan Mario Díaz-Arévalo takes up the role of religion in shaping Fals Borda’s thinking, specifically his Presbyterian upbringing and his later close engagement with Camilo Torres. This religious element finds parallels in Mariátegui’s own quite unorthodox stress on the religious dimension in shaping political consciousness. With Fals Borda it is visible in the close relationship between ethics and social research politics in his participatory action research approach to rural studies.

Finally, Álex Pereira shows just how original Historia doble de la Costa is, using a queer lens that brings out its unorthodox and hidden depths. Against heteronormative approaches, Fals Borda is seen as developing a view of a world beyond the remit of patriarchy. From a close reading of this text we can glimpse a new contemporary research agenda for the Andean region that abandons masculinist preconceptions and ways of seeing.

We are not, at this stage, proposing some grand synthesis of the work of these thinkers/activists to create a new “Andean” Marxism. We do suggest that (with the partial exception of Mariátegui and the methodological writings of Fals Borda) it has been neglected in the English-speaking world. The intellectual circuits of knowledge and publishing are still dominated by the English language. From the perspective of these writers, the very notion of “Latin American studies” is questionable. To develop new ways of thinking about Latin America we need to engage more with writers/activists such as Cueva, Zavaleta Mercado, and Fals Borda but also Álvaro García Linera, Bolívar Echeverría, and Silvia Rivero Cusicanqui, among others. As Roberto Fernández Retamar, the Cuban literary critic and president of Casa de las Américas, has put it in relation to Mariátegui but applicable to our broader problematic here: “Mariátegui is not at the end of a stage—hence his relevance—rather he is at the founding instance of a process that is not complete” (Fernández Retamar, 1994: 241). As the contributors to this issue show, there is a renewal of critical political thinking going on that breaks with all dogmatisms and focuses on practical solutions.
As to alternative Andean futures, there is rich vein of thinking emerging from the above thinkers and others, not least those in the *buen vivir* domain (for which see Artaraz, Calestani, and Trueba, 2021). Following in the wake of Mariátegui’s thinking/action, Flores Galindo and Burga (1982) developed the notion of an “Andean utopia” based on the peasant struggles of the precolonial period. This could be seen as idealized depiction of the Inca period as an era of harmony and prosperity, but that was not the way Flores Galindo saw it: “We are not advocating the Andean utopia. History should liberate us from the past, not seal us off” (Flores Galindo, 2010: 248). What the idea of an Andean utopia can do is challenge a version of history that condemns the subalterns to the margins, rejecting the “illusion of development understood as Westernization.” Nancy Postero (2007: 21), writing about Bolivia in the Evo Morales period, has argued in this regard that “if we think of utopias as a consciously constructed vision for the future, rather than a fruitless return to a fictitious past, then perhaps utopias are just what are needed in the Andes.” This is a forward-looking utopia that to various degrees unites the thinkers gathered in this collection: Mariátegui (most obviously) but also Fals Borda, Zavaleta Mercado, and Cueva, who in different ways looked to a future that would not condemn people to a failed development model and a denial of their aspirations. In his political testament, Flores Galindo (1989) expanded eloquently on this theme of a concrete Andean socialist utopia and what it would mean: “To swim against the current, not follow what is fashionable, the creative challenge is huge. . . . We must propose a new alternative society. We cannot predict or announce the future. The future is not closed. There is no recipe.” It is this creative challenge that all the thinkers here and others in their ambit are addressing and that we need to engage with in a way that is not closed or sectarian but open to new ways of thinking.

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