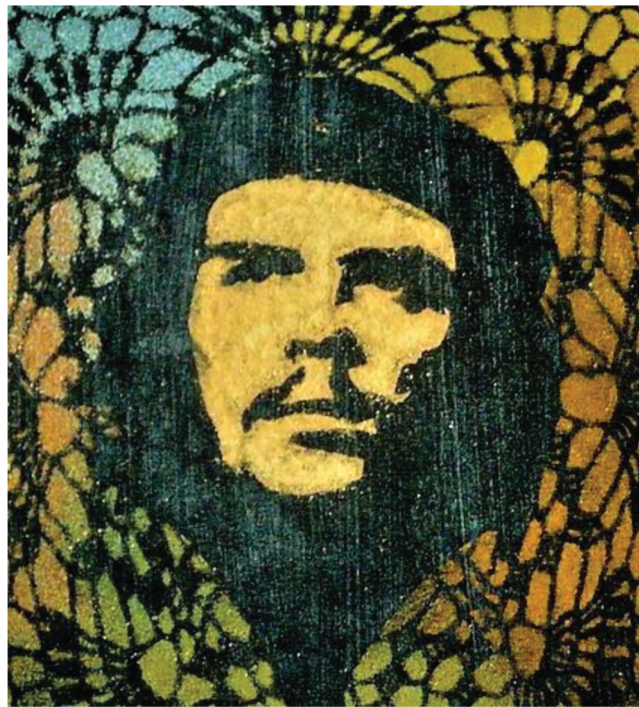


The *sui generis* Impact of the Russian Revolution on Latin America

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Lenin appears incontestably in our epoch as the most energetic and profound restorer of Marxist thought, whatever doubts plague the disillusioned author [de Man] of *Beyond Marxism*. Whether the reformists accept it or not, the Russian revolution constitutes the dominant accomplishment of contemporary socialism.

(José Carlos Mariátegui, In *Defense of Marxism*, 1930)



The impact of the Bolshevik Revolution was highly inspiring on the many existing Latin America socialist and radical political parties. Not only their leaders took the long and hazardous journey to Russia to see with their own eyes their dream of a socialist “republic of workers, peasants and soldiers,” and in 13 years they established 15 communist parties that joined the Comintern. The received wisdom within traditional Marxist thought was that unless capitalism developed the productive forces fully, the objective conditions for a socialist revolution would not exist. Therefore, the national bourgeoisie would not only lead the “first” stage of the revolution, but would play a progressive perhaps even a revolutionary role in carrying through the national-democratic tasks. The Russian Socialist Revolution demolished

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that rigid dogma to the approval of many Latin American revolutionary leaders such as Mella in Cuba, Recabarren in Chile and especially Mariátegui in Peru, who independently have come to pretty much the same conclusion. But, although the Russian Revolution vindicated their views, the Comintern's immense influence was used to guide them against applying in Latin America's backward capitalist societies what the Bolsheviks had done in backward Russia of 1917, namely, resolve the national-democratic tasks through a proletariat-led socialist revolution.

Introduction

The impact of the Russian Revolution in Latin America among existing radical, socialist political parties and social organizations was extraordinary and inspirational, especially given that oligarchic elites in the region had been hugely shaken by the mass peasant insurrection of the successful Mexican Revolution under the leadership of plebeian generals and revolutionaries, Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa.¹

There were socialist organizations in most Latin American nations from well before the 1917 Russian Revolution, most of them had been agitating and organizing among the working class in their countries with the aim of carrying out a socialist transformation of society through revolutionary means. Thus, when socialists in Latin America heard of events in Russia in 1917 and learned that in February a revolution had overthrown the reactionary Tsarist state, but that in October the proletariat under the socialist leadership of Lenin and the Bolsheviks had also ousted the national bourgeoisie from political power leading it to state power and had proclaimed a socialist republic of soviets, they were filled with enthusiasm and many of them traveled to Russia to see this extraordinary development with their own eyes. What they saw did not disappoint them.

José Ingenieros, Argentine socialist, founding father of socialism and communism in Argentina, said, "the Russian Revolution marks the arrival of social justice in the world." Luis Emilio Recabarren, founding father of Chilean socialism and communism, who after visiting the Soviet Union, declared that "the proletariat in Russia has all the power to bring about its future happiness and is arming itself with all the necessary instruments to build the communist society, as the true reign of social justice"; he went on to add that the proletariat of Chile needs only a bit better organizational discipline to undertake the destruction of the capitalist state and the carrying out of a socialist revolution (Recabarren, 1923: 4-5).² And José Carlos Mariátegui, founding father of socialism and communism in Peru and perhaps the most brilliant Marxist mind of his time, wrote that the bourgeoisie had proved incapable of resolving the problems of society, especially an economically backward society such as Peru, and therefore, "the solution cannot be but a socialist revolution [...], and, that, with the Russian Revolution, the [world] social revolution has begun."³

The expectations of Latin American revolutionary socialists that enthusiastically supported the Bolshevik Revolution became tangible reality when in 1919 the Bolsheviks and like-minded revolutionaries in Europe established the Communist International (Comintern hereafter) and were asked to adhere to it. The Platform of the Comintern addressed and included the key political and programmatic questions of their own socialist programs: the conquest of political power by the proletariat involving the annihilation of the political power of the bourgeoisie; the establishment of workers' (or Soviet) democracy; and the expropriation of capitalists and landlords. The building of a Communist Party, or of a revolutionary party, that is, the instrument of the conscious, politically educated vanguard of the proletariat was a crucial component for the carrying out of the socialist revolution.⁴ The Comintern's Platform confirmed the socialist nature of the coming revolutions:

One of the outstanding features of the Russian Revolution and other socialist revolutions after 1917 is that although they have all been products of historical

developments they can only be led into a socialist path by the conscious rationality of political theory and praxis. Revolutions of this kind seek to subordinate both necessity to freedom and unbridled economic forces to the dominion of reason.⁵

The Comintern was expected to create the political and intellectual conditions for the rise of “proletarian internationalism” through the establishment of communist parties the world over, which were to become the leading political instruments of the overthrow of capitalism, leading to the construction of socialist societies. This process was conceived as a dialogue and collaboration between the communists in power in the Soviet Union and the working class and oppressed classes, primarily the peasantry, in the underdeveloped world.

The rise of communist parties in Latin America was the direct result of the work of the Comintern but which based its activities mainly on existing socialist organizations that had emerged from a radical tradition that began in the nineteenth century.⁶ Thus, given the strong impact of the Russian Revolution among existing revolutionary organizations in Latin America, the Comintern found fertile ground on which to make serious inroads by managing to establish communist parties in some key countries. Thus, the influence of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution led to the formation of many communist parties in Latin America through the political transformation of many existing radical political organizations such as the following:

Dates of founding of Communist Parties in Latin America		
Argentina 1918	Guatemala 1922	Colombia 1930
Mexico 1919	Cuba 1925	Panama 1930
Uruguay 1920	Ecuador 1926	El Salvador 1930
Brazil 1922	Peru 1928	Venezuela 1931
Chile 1922	Paraguay 1928	Costa Rica 1931

These new communist parties were linked and approved as sections by the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI).

No doubt these developments were greatly helped by the enormous intellectual experience of the Soviet cadre leading the Comintern, the result of decades of theoretical and political debates about Marxism, the nature of the revolution in a backward country such as Russia, the correct approach to oppose imperialist wars, and above all, how to politically organize the working class so as to make it lead all the oppressed, primarily the peasant masses, in the struggle for the carrying out of a socialist revolution. The huge prestige of the Russian Revolution in the world, practically demonstrating to many an anarchist, anarcho-syndicalist and utopian socialist about the viability and success of the Bolshevik method, persuaded many of them to enthusiastically join or establish communist parties in their countries.

This was substantially assisted by the fact that many Latin American revolutionaries actually traveled to the Soviet Union to see by themselves how the land of the Soviets with Lenin and Trotsky were building socialism. An example of this was revolutionary and founder of the Labour Movement, the first socialist party in the country and also founder of Chile’s Communist Party, Luis Emilio Recabarren. Recabarren visited Moscow in 1922 to attend the Fourth Congress of the Comintern and the Second International Congress of the Red International Federation of Trade Unions and on his return he published *The Russia of Workers and Peasants* in 1923, a pamphlet of about 100 pages in which he gives a detailed account of what the Russian Revolution is all about, where he explains the politics of the Bolsheviks and calls upon Chilean workers to emulate their pairs in the Soviet Union (Recabarren, 1923).⁷

There were similar political leaders in Latin America in the early twentieth century who like Recabarren had sought to develop socialist or revolutionary parties aimed at the political independence of the working class who, in alliance with the peasantry and other dispossessed classes would endeavor to oust capitalism and begin the building of a socialist society. Apart from Recabarren, among the most prominent we have Juan B. Justo and Aníbal Ponce in Argentina, Julio Antonio Mella in Cuba and José Carlos Mariátegui in Peru (Löwy, 2007).⁸

Mariátegui's Latin American Brand of "Indigenous" Marxism

All of the above-mentioned political cadre and intellectuals had developed their own quite sophisticated analysis of the main characteristics of their societies and had broadly come to the conclusion that only a socialist revolution would address the issues of underdevelopment, social exclusion, discrimination, liberation from imperialist exploitation and subjugation, and peasant oppression and exploitation in their countries. They correctly believed the domestic capitalist class was too heavily dependent on its alliance with imperialism rendering it, therefore, unable to accomplish the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, including especially land redistribution. Julio Antonio Mella, leading Cuban Marxist, who was assassinated in 1929 when he was barely 26 years old, had no illusions about the national bourgeoisie which he characterized as "a traitor class to all the movements of true national emancipation" (Löwy, 2007: 106).⁹

In this regard, their views on the character of the national bourgeoisie in the backward countries were consistent with the Bolsheviks' assessment of Russia's national bourgeoisie, especially of Lenin and Trotsky, who were scathing about the lackey and dependent nature of the Russian capitalist class. Trotsky masterly sums up the historic incapacity of Russia's national bourgeoisie, as the bourgeoisies in Latin America, to carry out the national-democratic tasks:

Had the agrarian question been courageously solved by the bourgeoisie, the proletariat of Russia would not, obviously, have been able to arrive at the power in 1917. But the Russian bourgeoisie, covetous and cowardly, too late on the scene, prematurely a victim of senility, dared not lift a hand against feudal property.¹⁰

As early as 1905, Lenin himself had come pretty much to the same conclusion:

In order that it may be consistently carried to its conclusion, our democratic revolution must rely on such forces as are capable of paralyzing the inevitable inconsistency of the bourgeoisie (i.e., capable precisely of "causing it to recoil from the revolution") *The proletariat must carry to completion the democratic revolution, by allying to itself the mass of the peasantry in order to crush by force the resistance of the autocracy and to paralyze the instability of the bourgeoisie.*¹¹

It was Mariátegui who, having lived in Europe (1920–23) where he was influenced by Georges Sorel, and through him, by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and by Gramsci, was going to develop the most accomplished application of Marxism to the specifics of Latin American reality. Mariátegui was living in Italy during the Turin factory occupations of 1920, and in 1921 he participated at the Livorno Congress of the Italian Socialist Party that through a split led to the formation of the Italian Communist Party. When Mariátegui finally left for Peru in 1922, Mussolini at the head of Italian fascism was on his way to power. Furthermore, in his short political life (he died in 1930 when he was barely 34 years old), Mariátegui wrote profusely covering a wide range of subjects:

He wrote very astute analyses of fascism in Italy, championed the movement for Indian independence from Britain, and supported women's liberation; he wrote dozens of profiles of political figures like Trotsky, Lenin, and Debs, and of intellectual and literary figures from Freud to John Dos Passos. His collected works run to more than 900 articles and about half a dozen books, three published during his lifetime.¹²

Thus, Mariátegui, of all Latin American revolutionary socialists of his time, had probably the most internationalist Marxist perspective. Mariátegui sought to develop Marxism so as to root it in the specificities of Peruvian and Latin American history and reality, within which what he called the “national” and “popular” became central tenets of its highly original variety of Latin American Marxism. For Mariátegui, the central issue which he encompassed in the “national” and the “popular” was the role of the peasantry and the “indigenous question” in the socialist revolution.

Mariátegui’s prolific intellectual production places him as one of the pioneers in applying a Marxist framework to the specifics of the backward socio-economic formation of Latin America. He made the most systematic effort to “indigenize” Marxism to turn it into a useful tool of revolutionary analysis and action, and his efforts crystallized in his best opus, *Seven Interpretive Essays of Peruvian Reality*, published in 1928 (Mariátegui, 1928).¹³

Unfortunately, Mariátegui’s brand of indigenous Latin American Marxism was cut short from further developing because 1928, the year of the publication of his seminal *Seven Essays*, was exactly the year when the Comintern, under the influence of Joseph Stalin, launched the “bolshevization” of all communist parties in what became known as the “third period” characterized by absurd ultra-leftism (the so-called “class against class tactics”) that identified “political reformism” as the main enemy in a policy that led to the isolation of communist parties around the world, including Latin America. The “third period” was also characterized by extreme ideologization and rigid fossilization of the tenets of Marxism that were handed down from the Comintern to all communist parties, including in Latin America.

About this period of “the ultra-radical turn of 1928”, Isaac Deutscher, in his biography of Stalin, writes,

The communist parties in the west were to launch their final offensive against capitalism. The reformist Social Democratic parties, now labelled Social-Fascist, were to be regarded as the most dangerous enemies of communism. The left wings of the Social Democratic parties were to be regarded as even greater obstacles to Socialist revolution than the right ones – “the more to the left the more dangerous.” [...] [Stalin] made “socialism in one country” the supreme article of faith, obligatory not only in his own party but in the Comintern as a whole. (Deutscher, 1949: 405)¹⁴

The ultra-left “third period” of the Comintern led to the First Congress of Latin American Communist parties held in 1929 in Buenos Aires (Argentina) attended by 15 parties from the region, where delegates from Mexico, Guatemala and Colombia advocated the taking up of arms to organize revolutionary uprisings throughout the continent, arguing that if communists did not do it, bourgeois forces would lead the unavoidable mass uprisings. More importantly, the congress took an unequivocal stance against the views of José Carlos Mariátegui, it also distanced itself from non-communist left-wing parties, and expressed distrust of peasants, intellectuals and organizations of indigenous peoples.¹⁵

It is not the focus of this article to critique Soviet foreign policy under Stalin except that the political and ideological evolution of the Comintern since 1917 impacted quite negatively on the potential of the established communist parties in Latin America.

Evolution of the Comintern’s Policies

It was the Fourth Congress of the Comintern, held in 1922 in Moscow, which included Latin America in its agenda for the first time. This led, 3 years later, to the establishment of the South American Secretariat of the Comintern.

The very brief resolution of the Fourth Congress of the Comintern on Latin America (*A los Obreros y Campesinos de America del Sur! To the Workers and Peasants of South America!*) calls on the region’s “workers and peasants to prepare themselves for the class struggle and support the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat of the whole world” (Löwy,

2007: 88–91).¹⁶ The mistake of referring to Latin America as “South America” is probably a symptom of the lack of detailed knowledge existing in Moscow and Europe, about the region at the time.

The resolution is four pages long, and is pretty general although it does point out the sustained economic penetration of Latin America by US imperialism leading to its subordination. Thus, the resolution warns against the alliance of the ruling classes of Latin America with US imperialism against the struggles of workers and peasants through repression and attacks on democracy. Additionally, the resolution exhorts Latin American workers and peasants to get organized, to fight back, and to join the international struggle against imperialism and capitalism. And finally, it calls upon them to become part of the world revolution started by the Russian Revolution in 1917 by setting up communist parties throughout Latin America.

The biggest issue that the Comintern never quite came to grips with was the specificities of Latin America’s socio-economic formation and especially its cultural manifestations. The conundrum was how to ensure the proletariat carries out a socialist revolution in Latin America, a continent where the working class was an insignificant minority of society, its component organized in trade unions was even smaller, and those involved in proletarian, radical and/or socialist political parties was even less significant.

The 1917 Russian proletariat, also a minority in society, at least was highly concentrated in huge industrial developments, context that allowed it to organize a string of unions and its radical social strength, created the conditions for the rise of Russian Social Democracy from within which the Bolshevik Party would emerge. Furthermore, the combination of the crisis brought about by the First World War and the Russian proletariat youthful character, in alliance with soldiers and peasants, pushed it to establish broad mass revolutionary social organizations such as the Soviets. The small and fragmented Latin American working class enjoyed none of these advantages. Unless it was able to establish, and politically harness to its program, a social/political alliance with the peasantry, there would be no prospect of carrying out a socialist transformation of society, economy and state.

In this regard, the rejection of Mariátegui’s views on the “national-popular” and the “indigenous question” became the crucial obstacle to develop a strategy of revolution that took into account the specificities of the backward nature of capitalist societies in Latin America. This was compounded by the suspicious attitude adopted by the Comintern towards other “intractable” political phenomena of Latin American reality, namely, nationalism and populism.¹⁷

There is little justification for the Comintern’s rejection of Mariátegui’s views, primarily because in terms of the numerical strength of the key social classes in 1917 Russia resembled more the socio-political configuration of Latin America than that of developed capitalist Europe: weak industrialization, a dependent and even weaker foreign-dominated industrial bourgeoisie, a socially and politically much stronger landowner class exerting domination and oppression over a huge very backward and thoroughly marginalized peasantry, the most numerous social class in Czarist Russia (Trotsky, 2008)¹⁸, existing in a polity rule by a monarchy through a feudal state. Furthermore, Mariátegui, who understood the significance of the Russian Revolution for the struggle of the world proletariat, primarily in Europe, but particularly for the underdeveloped world, especially Latin America, had no misgivings of any kind to welcome it as such thus in *Defence of Marxism*, published in 1934. He said,

Lenin appears incontestably in our epoch as the most energetic and profound restorer of Marxist thought, whatever doubts plague the disillusioned author [de Man] of *Beyond Marxism*. Whether the reformists accept it or not, the Russian revolution constitutes the dominant accomplishment of contemporary socialism. (Vanden and Becker, 2011: 190)¹⁹

In *Defence of Marxism* Mariátegui goes even further, since in it he takes up the defense of the Russian Revolution and the leadership of the Bolshevik Party for having led a well articulated and robust Marxist debunking of Social Democratic critics of the Bolshevik revolution. To Mariátegui, the criticisms of Social Democracy against the Bolsheviks are due to the fact that the reformists resisted revolution during the post-war agitation for the most rudimentary economic determinist reasons—reasons that were, in essence, identified with the conservative bourgeoisie and that denounced the absolutely bourgeois and non-socialist character of such determinism. To the majority of its critics, the Russian Revolution appears, on the other hand, as a rationalist, romantic, anti-historical effort of utopian fanatics. All caliber of reformists primarily rebuked the revolutionaries' tendency to force history, censuring the tactics of the Third International's parties as "Blanquist" and "putschist." (Vanden and Becker, 2011: 208–209)²⁰

Furthermore, Mariátegui not only praises the best-known leaders of the Russian Revolution such as Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin and Lunacharsky (Vanden and Becker, 2011: 197) but he also defends Stalin against the virulent attacks of Max Eastman in his *Since Lenin Died* (Eastman, 1925)²¹ whom he labels a "super-Trotskyite."

Thus, the Comintern's rejection of Mariátegui's "indoamerican socialism" was not grounded on him being an anti-Stalin "heretic" who somehow took a crypto-Trotskyite position on the international and Latin American class struggle, as has been argued by some historians (Löwy, 2007).²² His views were rejected by the Comintern at the First Conference of Latin American Communist parties, held in Buenos Aires in 1929 at the height of the "bolshhevization" of the Latin American parties when the Comintern was dominated by an ultra-left frenzy leading it to adopt an insurrectionary line the world over, including in Latin America where revolutionary eruptions were expected everywhere and communists were urged by the Comintern to foster, lead, create and/or even provoke the conditions for insurrectionary uprisings.

The Plenum of the ECCI which met after the Sixth Congress (July 1929) endorsed this ultra-left line. On the eve of the Plenum, the theoretical organ of the CPSU wrote,

In the whole capitalist world the strike wave is rising. This wave is occurring in the highly developed imperialist countries as well as in the backward colonies at times and in places which interlink with elements of a stubborn revolutionary struggle and civil war. Into the struggle are drawn and actively participate the masses of the unorganized ... The growth of dissatisfaction and the Leftward swing of the masses also embraces the millions of the agricultural workers and oppressed peasantry. (*Bolshevik*, June 1929, No. 12, page 9)²³

Mariátegui's line of reasoning was within the framework of Gramsci's, who took an entirely opposite view on the Russian Revolution to the mechanistic and Menshevik/Social Democratic two-stages theory of doctrinaire/orthodox Marxism and he characterized the Bolshevik Revolution not as a revolution against capital but against *Das Kapital*:

The Bolshevik revolution is based more on ideology than actual events (therefore, at the end of the day, we really don't need to know any more than we know already). It's a revolution against Karl Marx's Capital. In Russia, Marx's Capital was the book of the bourgeoisie, more than of the proletariat. It was the crucial proof needed to show that, in Russia, there had to be a bourgeoisie, there had to be a capitalist era, there had to be a Western-style of progression, before the proletariat could even think about making a comeback, about their class demands, about revolution. Events overcame ideology. Events have blown out of the water all critical notions which stated Russia would have to develop according to the laws of historical materialism. The Bolsheviks renounce Karl Marx and they assert, through their clear statement of action, through what they have achieved, that the laws of historical materialism are not as set in stone, as one may think, or one may have thought previously.²⁴

In 1928, Mariátegui published his pioneering and seminal *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* where he enunciates that the revolution in Peru would be socialist and, therefore, as in Russia, also against *Das Kapital*:

On the one hand, we who profess socialism struggle logically and consistently for the reorganization of our country on Socialist bases; proving that the economic and political regime that we oppose has turned into an instrument for colonizing the country on behalf of foreign imperialist capitalism, we declare that this is a moment in our history when it is impossible to be really nationalist and revolutionary without being Socialist. On the other hand, there does not exist and never has existed in Peru a progressive bourgeoisie, endowed with national feelings, that claims to be liberal and democratic and that derives its policy from the postulates of its doctrine.²⁵

The question of political logistics was how to move from the enunciation of the issue of the potential for socialist transformation of Peruvian society in this fashion to concretize it into the reality of the existing class configuration. Mariátegui gave this solution:

We believe that in the so-called “backward” populations, like the indigenous population descended from the Incas, gathers very favorable conditions where primitive agrarian communism, surviving in concrete structures and in a deep collectivist spirit, can be transformed, under the leadership (“hegemonía”) of the proletariat, into one of the most solid bases of the collectivist society that Marxist communism envisioned.²⁶

In other words, the peasantry can be mobilized in the struggle for socialism under proletarian leadership by appealing to this collectivist tradition that stems from the Inca period embodied in the communally held land in the form of the *ayllu*, a kin-based organization of production and resources.²⁷ That is why for him The Indian Question provided the key to unleash the socialist revolution in Peru.²⁸ To Mariátegui, the “Indian Question,” that had deep race and cultural dimensions, could not be overcome through civil rights and education, he strongly believed it was deeply rooted in the colonial legacy of the semi-feudal land tenure system, thus the crucial task was the overthrow of the landowners and a radical agrarian reform through the self-activity, self-organization and revolutionary action of the indigenous communities and peasants in alliance with the working class.

The basic broad theoretical tenets of Mariátegui’s program of socialist revolution for Peru, and by derivation, Latin America, are that the national bourgeoisie is incapable of carrying out the tasks of national liberation and economic development, thus a coalition of other, subordinate classes, must be established to accomplish them where this coalition in order to consistently carry them out to their logical conclusion, socialism must be led by the working class. To him the successful socialist revolution will create the best context to overcome existing racial divisions through the development of a new national identity and even a new concept of nation. The indigenous population, based on its ancestral collectivist traditions, will play a central role in building a socialist state. One can see the poignant relevance of Mariátegui’s prescience in light of the experience of the Bolivian indigenous masses – representing 65% of the country’s population – who have been the driving force of Evo Morales’s leadership of the country’s socialist transformation. In Mariátegui’s time Peru’s indigenous population, as in 1917 Russia, the peasantry represented 80% of the total.

Mariátegui summed up his view of the content and form of the socialist revolution he was trying to carry out thus

The Latin American Revolution will be nothing more and nothing less than a stage, a phase of the world revolution. It will simply and clearly be the socialist revolution. Add all the adjectives you want to this word according to a particular case: “anti-imperialist,” “agrarian,” “national-revolutionary.” Socialism supposes, precedes, and includes all of them.

We certainly do not want socialism in Latin America to be a copy or imitation. It should be a heroic creation. We have to give life to Indo-American socialism with our own reality, in our own language. Here is a mission worthy of a new generation.

It was as though he knew the nature, form, dynamics and politics of the socialist revolutions of the twenty-first century in Latin America.

Mariátegui's position on the socialist revolution he advocated placed the Indian Question at the center of its programmatic tasks, and in a polemic in 1927, he was pretty categorical about it: "socialism cannot be Peruvian – nor can it even be socialism – if it does not stand first in solidarity with Indigenous demands"(Becker, 2006: 453).²⁹

Mariátegui went even further and harshly criticized bourgeois and petty bourgeois "culturalist solutions" to the Indian Question:

In Latin American bourgeois intellectual speculation, the race question serves, among other things, to disguise or evade the continent's real problems. Marxist criticism has the unavoidable obligation of establishing it in real terms, ridding it of all sophistic or pedantic equivocation. Economically, socially, and politically, the race question, like the land question, is fundamentally that of liquidating feudalism. (Becker, 2006: 462)³⁰

Contrary to Mariátegui's views, the Comintern, heavily influenced by the "Black" question in the USA and South Africa, at the 1929 Conference of Communist Parties favored a policy of forming an Independent Indian Republic, advocating that communists joined the struggles of indigenous people for a separate independent republic with state rights. The Comintern, basing itself on the writings of Lenin and Stalin on the National Question in Russia, saw subordinate nationalities in Latin America as oppressed nations that should enjoy the right to self-determination, including the right to set up their independent nations, including developing some state structures but that were an integral part of the Soviet Union, besides the preservation and development of their own cultures and languages, but without having the right to secede to form separate states (Becker, 2006: 464).³¹

Mariátegui was directly opposed to the establishment of independent Indian Republics arguing that although the proposal might work elsewhere, it ignored the socio-economic reality of the indigenous masses in Peru and Bolivia (and elsewhere in Latin America). He believed that it would lead to an "Indian bourgeois state with all the internal and external contradictions of other bourgeois states." Furthermore, Quechan and Aymaran communities were spread along the spine of the Andes from Chile all the way to Colombia and Ecuador, including communities in Argentina, Bolivia and Peru, thus an independent Indian Republic would have no industrial base or outlets to the sea, thus making it economically unviable. But for him the worst aspect of the Comintern's proposal was the serious underestimation of the existing nation-states in the continent to contemplate such a drastic reconfiguration. Furthermore, Mariátegui added, the Comintern's line would exclude mestizo peasant and urban workers from the struggle.

At the First Conference of Communist Parties held in 1929, Comintern representatives in Latin America rejected Mariátegui's views on the Indian Question because, they argued, its weakest feature was his failure to follow the Leninist line on the National Question which, they argued, "could only be resolved through a separatist movement of self-determination rather than a multiclass revolutionary movement which the socialists in Peru currently pursued" (Becker, 2006: 467).³² With this stance the Comintern made a major mistake on one of the most crucial features of the class struggle in Latin America at the time. In other words, the Comintern's rejection of Mariátegui's views resulted from a gross misunderstanding of the realities of Latin America.

Before the Comintern's adoption of the popular front line, Latin American communists and nationalists demonstrated the real potential they had for unleashing insurrection or radical action. Thus, for example, in Nicaragua between 1926 and 1933, Augusto César

Sandino, a nationalist freemason, led a successful guerrilla struggle against a US military invasion that his small guerrilla force managed to defeat forcing Uncle Sam to pull its Marines out, in a heroic campaign that was internationally supported by the Comintern-led Anti-Imperialist League based in Brussels. In 1932, the communist Agustín Farabundo Martí, who had been a leading member in Sandino's guerrillas, launched a mass peasant insurrection in El Salvador, "the first and only mass insurrection led by a communist party in the history of Latin America (Löwy, 2007: 22).³³ And in Brazil, in 1935, military officer Carlos Prestes led another, though smaller, armed uprising. Prestes had joined the communist party in 1931, but would assume Brazil's Communist Party's leadership in 1935 (Caballero, 2002: 8–9).³⁴

Latin American evolution since European colonization was littered with revolts and insurrections. Indigenous insurrections had taken place in Peru and Bolivia in the eighteenth century. And the Comintern's line against Mariátegui's opposition of an Independent Indian Republic had some bases in the region's history. There had been large-scale indigenous revolts starting from the one led by Tupak Amaru II in 1780 in Peru that had its counterpart in an indigenous armed rebellion in 1781 in Bolivia led by Tupak Katari (during the insurrection, Katari and his forces laid siege to La Paz for 6 months); then, in 1915, Teodomiro Gutiérrez, who took the

name Rumi Maqui (Quechua for "Stone Hand"), led a radical separatist revolt in Puno, Peru, attempting to restore Tawantinsuyu³⁵ as a separate state governed by Indians. Subsequently, in the 1930s in Bolivia, Eduardo Leandro Nina Qhispi assumed the presidency of the Republic of Collasuyu (the southern quarter of the old Inca empire). (Becker, 2006: 472)³⁶

Nevertheless, the decision to reject Mariátegui's strategy for revolution, with his focus on how to politically mobilize the crucial social classes of society, the working class, the peasantry and the indigenous masses, into a driving force for a socialist revolution combining the accomplishment of the bourgeois-democratic, anti-imperialist tasks with the building of a socialist society, was to have momentous consequences. Despite the ultra-left excesses of the "third period" the Comintern continue to adhere to the theory of the revolution by stages, placing Latin America in the national-democratic stage. In the case of Peru, this line coincided with that of the populist APRA whose charismatic leader, Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre³⁷ argued that before the socialist revolution, the people of Peru must go through various stages of political and economic transformation and even perhaps for a social revolution to free it from imperialist subjugation.

With such programmatic framework, the Comintern characterized the backward, agrarian structure of Latin America as feudal, the national bourgeoisie as progressive or even revolutionary, and the peasantry as petty bourgeois and, therefore, hostile to socialism. The basic political framework that this creates is the notion that economically backward countries require a bourgeois-democratic stage in which freedom from imperialist subjugation and the development of the productive forces will be accomplished by the bourgeoisie, and where the bourgeoisie would play a leading progressive role. In Latin America, at least, this has proved to be catastrophic and has led to defeat after defeat.

This strategy of the Comintern for Latin America plus the process of bolshevization of the small communist parties became serious obstacles for the prospects to develop political leaderships for the working class movement equipped politically and programmatically to take account of the peculiarities and specificities of the socio-economic realities of the region so as to maximize the mass appeal in the struggle against imperialist domination, feudal oppression and national capital's impotency to carry out its historic tasks to develop the productive forces by implementing a bourgeois-democratic transformation.

The bolshevization of Latin America's communist parties involved purging them from "deviationists" and "negative elements" within their ranks "if need be, through a

ruthless selection of the best elements among the working class who are devoted heart and soul to the cause of the revolution” (Spenser, 2011: 148).³⁸ Revolutionary and communist parties have to constantly engage in these kind of exercises just as a matter of essential survival and “house keeping” but the “bolshevization” drive launched in 1928 by the Comintern led to a drastic bureaucratization of party structures, reduced levels of critical discussions increasing sycophantic fidelity to the Comintern’s line and a stifling of penetrating analysis of the concrete situations in the class struggle. Furthermore, between 1924 and 1935, the Comintern’s line, mirroring the Soviet Union’s foreign policy, went through many twists and turns, just as the analytical capacity of the communist parties was stifled and, therefore, impoverished.

When the third period came to an end, it was replaced by the Popular Front strategy where the radicalism of the previous formulations, especially regarding the distrust of the bourgeoisie, however necessary its role may have been deemed to be, virtually disappeared. Thus, communist parties evolved from a line of launching voluntaristic insurrections in the 1930s to extreme moderation including supporting Cuba’s eventual dictator Fulgencio Batista in the early 1940s, joined the Frente Democrático of Peru’s traditional liberal oligarchy, became a component of Argentina’s right-wing Unión Democrática against Juan Domingo Perón, and opposed Colombia’s most popular mass leader ever, Eliecer Gaitán.³⁹ Even worse, the pre-Fidel Castro communist party in Cuba, the Popular Socialist Party, did not initially support his guerrilla activities begun in 1956 and was in fact quite hostile to Fidel’s “petty bourgeois methods” of guerrilla warfare. In Nicaragua, in 1979, the Nicaraguan Communist party was viscerally opposed to the Sandinista Revolution and even joined the right-wing, US-funded, UNO coalition (Unión Nacional Opositora – Opposition National Coalition) that defeated the Sandinistas in the February 1990 presidential election.

In other words, as a consequence of failing to “indigenize” Marxism to take account of the social, economic, cultural, historical and other specificities of the concrete situations presented by the class struggle in Latin America, the communist parties of the region misunderstood, misread and missed the largest mass movements that emerged in many countries thus marginalizing themselves from key political and social developments. This took place in the key period of 1918–28 when the inspiration the Bolshevik Revolution had generated among existing socialist and revolutionary parties in Latin America was high indeed, especially their perception that the revolution in Russia was in the process of substantially contributing to creating the conditions for the building of the socialist society they all wanted in Latin America.⁴⁰

Only a political leadership of the quality, sophistication and theoretical understanding of the calibre of José Carlos Mariátegui equipped with a strategy of revolution rooted in the concrete and specific history, culture and socio-economic reality of their nations, could have turned the immense original attractiveness of the Russian Revolution into a powerful and inspirational political factor that galvanized the mass of workers, peasants and indigenous masses behind the type of program, politics and strategy, he, and others like him, were popularizing in Latin America.

Conclusion

By 1935, the extraordinary inspirational potential the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution had brought about in Latin America in the early 1920s had vanished from the emerging communist parties established in its wake. The promising beginnings of the establishment of communist parties in Latin America committed to a program of socialist revolution as one component of a continental and world revolution, following in the wake of the 1917 Russian Revolution, had run quite rapidly into organizational complications, ideological confusion, and political zigzagging.

The rather mechanical application by the Soviet leadership of the policy on the national question and the nature of the national bourgeoisie in the tasks posed by the countries' backwardness to Latin America, brought about political confusion among the ranks and leaderships of the recent Latin American Comintern affiliates, particularly on two crucial questions: the character and role of the national bourgeoisie in the accomplishment of the national-democratic tasks, and the approach of revolutionary socialists to the indigenous question, that took place, especially after 1924.

After Lenin's death and with the steady ascendancy of Stalin to dominance in the Soviet Union and the Comintern, the Latin American communist parties went from insane ultra-leftism, especially after 1928, to dogmatic identification with the twists and turns of the Comintern. The line, instead of being the consequence of strategic discussions prompted by the concrete analysis of the concrete situation and having a decisive input from the parties, who would implement them in their own countries, became increasingly a manifestation of the Soviet Union's foreign policy twists and turns.

The incoherence of the zigzagging and twisting and turning finally settled in 1935 with the adoption by the Comintern of the reformist policy of the Popular Front. By then, the revolutionary ethos and enthusiasm for socialist revolution with well worked-out programs of action to carry them out as with Mariátegui in Peru had vanished from the existing communist parties in Latin America. In many countries, revolutionary formations came to see them as obstacles and revolutionary currents tended to organize independently and outside the communist parties.

After the period covered in our analysis Latin American socialist revolutions have developed and taken place with little reference to the Russian revolution of 1917, instead they have looked to root their ideology and principles in their nations' own history. Thus in Cuba most of the key ideas, principles and revolutionary ethos of Fidel's political organization, the July 26 Movement, came from José Martí. In Nicaragua, the mobilizing and inspirational drive for revolution in 1979 (that is still the case today), came from freemason, nationalist and anti-imperialist guerrilla fighter, *General de Hombres Libres* (General of free men), César Augusto Sandino. In Bolivia, it is Indian leader of the 1781 anti-Spanish indigenous revolt, Tupak Katari who is the iconic symbol of the socialist transformation in that nation. And, in the best-known example of socialist revolution, Venezuela, the symbolic figure around which the masses are motivated, mobilized, inspired and politically educated, is nineteenth-century Liberator, Simon Bolivar. In none of them the inspiring and mobilizing figure has been Marx, let alone Lenin. However, they have all adhered to a type of Marxism and Leninism that has been, and is being, considerably "indigenized" à la Mariátegui.

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Notes

¹ The Mexican Revolution involved a 10-year Civil War (1910–20) between the armed peasant masses and the country's oligarchy, where the defeat of the latter led to the establishment of a revolutionary government and the enactment of the 1917 constitution just before the Bolshevik Revolution, deemed to be the most advanced constitution of its time. See Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, vol. 1 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).

² Luis Emilio Recabarren, *La Rusia Obrera y Campesina* (Santiago: Talleres Gráficos, 1923), 4–5.

³ J. C. Mariátegui, "The World Crisis and the Peruvian Proletariat," lecture delivered on 15 June 1923, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mariategui/works/1924-hwc/hwco1.htm> (accessed 28 October 2017).

⁴ Platform of the Communist International adopted by the First Congress, in Jane Degras (ed.), "The Communist International 1919–1943 Documents," vol. I, 17–24, <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/documents/volume1-1919-1922.pdf> (accessed 28 October 2017).

⁵ Modesto Guerrero et al., ¿Para qué sirvió la Revolución Rusa?, *Resumen Latinoamericano*, 30 March 2017, <http://www.resumenlatinoamericano.org/2017/03/30/para-que-sirvio-la-revolucion-rusa/> (accessed 12 October 2017).

⁶ The nineteenth century in Latin America witnessed the rise of quite strong utopian socialist, anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist currents primarily but not exclusively in the countries located in the Atlantic coast (Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico); there was some presence of Latin American delegates and observers in the Second International, the Communist Manifesto had been published in Spanish in 1870 and Volume One of *Das Kapital* was also translated into Spanish in 1895 (Guerrero et al., ¿Para qué sirvió la Revolución Rusa?)

⁷ Recabarren, *La Rusia Obrera y Campesina*; Recabarren had established a Socialist Workers Party among nitrate workers and trade unions in the north of Chile as early as 1912.

⁸ For details see the excellent compilation by Michel Löwy, *El marxismo en América Latina* (Chile: LOM Ediciones, 2007).

⁹ Julio Antonio Mella, "El proletariado y la liberación nacional," in Löwy, op. cit., 106.

¹⁰ Leon Trotsky, "In Defence of October," A speech delivered in Copenhagen, Denmark in November 1932, *Marxists Archive*, 1932, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/11/oct.htm> (accessed 28 October 2017).

¹¹ Vladimir Lenin, "Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution," 1905, *Marxists Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/tactics/ch12.htm> (accessed 28 October 2017).

¹² Lance Selfa, "Mariátegui and Latin American Marxism," *International Socialist Review*, Issue 96 (Spring 2015), <https://isreview.org/issue/96/mariategui-and-latin-american-marxism> (accessed 12 October 2017).

¹³ José Carlos Mariátegui, *7 Ensayos de Interpretación de la Realidad Peruana* (Lima: Biblioteca Amauta, 1928), published in English as *Seven Interpretive Essays of Peruvian Reality* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971).

¹⁴ Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 405.

¹⁵ Guerrero et al., ¿Para qué sirvió la Revolución Rusa?

¹⁶ Michael Löwy, *El Marxismo en América Latina: antología, desde 1909 hasta nuestros días* (LOM Ediciones, 2007), 88–91.

¹⁷ We do not have space here to examine the phenomenon of populism, for details see Francisco Panizza (ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005).

¹⁸ Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008).

¹⁹ Harry E. Vanden and Marc Becker (eds.), *Jose Carlos Mariategui: An Anthology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011), 190.

²⁰ Vanden and Becker, *Jose Carlos Mariategui*, 208–209.

²¹ In Max Eastman, *Since Lenin Died* (London: The Whitefriars Press, 1925).

²² See in particular Michel Löwy, *El marxismo en América Latina* (LOM Ediciones, 2007).

²³ Quoted in Trotsky, "The 'Third Period' of the Comintern's Mistakes," *Marxist Internet Archive*, 1930, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/01/mistakes4.htm> (accessed 23 October 2017). It is widely accepted that the "Third Period" was a cover triggered by the catastrophic policy of the "bloc of four classes" in China between 1925–1927 that subordinated China's Communist party to the Kuomintang, leading to the massacre of hundreds of thousands of communists and to their crushing political defeat.

²⁴ Published in *Avanti*, newspaper of the Italian Socialist party on 24 December 1917; reproduced in English in *Marxists Archives*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/1917/12/revolution-against-capital.htm> (accessed 19 October 2017).

²⁵ José Carlos Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), in *Marxists Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mariategui/works/7-interpretive-essays/essay02.htm> (accessed 19 October 2017). The book was first published in Spanish in Peru in 1928.

²⁶ Lance Selfa, “Mariátegui and Latin American Marxism,” *International Socialist Review*, Issue 96 (Spring 2015), <https://isreview.org/issue/96/mariategui-and-latin-american-marxism> (accessed 19 October 2017).

²⁷ A good discussion on the *ayllu* is in Julian H. Steward (ed.), *Handbook of South American Indians*, vol. 2 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1946), 183–330.

²⁸ “The Indian Question,” a key component of *Seven Interpretive Essays*, is without doubt the most novel feature of his thought as well as the clearest manifestation of Mariátegui’s effort to “indigenize” Marxism.

²⁹ Marc Becker, “Mariátegui, the Comintern, and the Indigenous Question in Latin America,” *Science & Society* 70, no. 4 (October 2006): 450–479, 453.

³⁰ Marc Becker, “Mariátegui, the Comintern, and the Indigenous Question in Latin America,” 450–479, 462; Ricardo Martínez de la Torre, *Apuntes para una interpretación marxista de la historia social del Perú*, vol. 2 (Lima: Empresa Editora Peruana, 1947–1949), 434.

³¹ Marc Becker, “Mariátegui, the Comintern, and the Indigenous Question in Latin America,” 450–479, 464

³² Marc Becker, “Mariátegui, the Comintern, and the Indigenous Question in Latin America,” 450–479, 467.

³³ Michel Löwy, *El Marxismo en América Latina: antología, desde 1909 hasta nuestros días* (LOM Ediciones, 2007), 22.

³⁴ Manuel Caballero, *Latin America and the Comintern, 1919–1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8–9.

³⁵ *Tawantinsuyu*, was the name the Incas gave to their empire and the *Collasuyu*, was its southern region or province historically inhabited by the Aymara, one of the largest ethnic groups of Bolivia.

³⁶ Marc Becker, “Mariátegui, the Comintern, and the Indigenous Question in Latin America,” 450–479, 472; for a detailed account of the 1780–81 rebellions in Peru and Bolivia see N. A. Robins, *Priest-Indian Conflict in Upper Peru: The Generation of Rebellion, 1750–1780* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007).

³⁷ Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, a Peruvian radical politician, shared Mariátegui’s view that the Indian Question was tied up to the semi-feudal land ownership in Peru, he was a strong anti-imperialist and campaigned for Latin America to be termed “Indo-America”; APRA (American Popular Revolutionary Alliance – Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana), has had a following substantially larger than that of the Communist Party.

³⁸ Daniela Spenser, *Stumbling Its Way Through Mexico: The Early Years of the Communist International* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), 148.

³⁹ Guerrero et al., ¿Para qué sirvió la Revolución Rusa?

⁴⁰ Recabarren, *La Rusia Obrera y Campesina*.