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SOCIALISM, LAND AND THE INDIAN IN THE 7 ENSAYOS

Harry E. Vanden

José Carlos Mariátegui's 7 *ensayos en interpretación de la realidad ' peruana* has been called "one of the great Latin American books of the twentieth century" (Harold Eugene Davis, *Latin American Thought,* 1972, p. 189). It is, at the very least, one of the best analyses of Peruvian society yet written and one of the outstanding *ensayos* to appear in Latin American letters in this century. Since its publication in 192.8 (Lima: Biblioteca Amauta), it has gone through some thirty editions, and has been translated into five foreign languages, including English and Russian.[1] By most calculations, the 7 *Ensayos* is the most widely read work by a Peruvian author. It not only broke ground by basing its analysis on data from census records and other empirical (rather than impressionistic) sources, but was the first extensive study of Latin American reality from a Marxist-Leninist perspective. As such, it can be seen as the forerunner of the Marxist and dependency analyses which have come to dominate much of Latin American writing in the social sciences.

Writing at a time when Peru — and indeed most of Latin America — was just beginning to move toward modernity, much of the initial part of the work is devoted to the two themes which Mariátegui considered to be of the greatest importance in understanding the Peruvian reality: the land and the Indian. Indeed Mariátegui believed that the land tenure system and the conditions of the Indian masses were the two most important factors for the development of a modern Peru.

Mariátegui was concerned with Peru's plight in the modernizing world. As a Socialist, he was most interested in the conditions of the masses generally, and the Peruvian peasants in particular. 7 *Ensayos,* then, is an analysis of Peru, its economy, and the conditions of the largest segment of the Peruvian population — the Indian masses. It displays not only Mariátegui's preoccupation with economic, social, and political factors in the evolution of the Peruvian nation, but with their influence on the living conditions of its inhabitants. Its focus is in keeping with the agricultural nature of the nation and its populace, and thus does not dwell on an analysis of the minute urban proletariat and its living conditions. Rather it focuses on the two main factors of production in the Peru of that time: the land and the Indian.

The structure and functioning of the Peruvian nation can best be explained by an analysis of the fundamental economic conditions. Mariátegui was applying his Marxist methodology to Peruvian history so as to gain

a clearer picture of the exact nature of how and why Peru had developed as it did. On the basis of sparce data about the Incan empire, he believed that the Incan system of "primitive Communism" (he was unfamiliar with Marx's writings on the mode of Asiatic production) was productive and met the needs of the indigenous population. Thus it was the Spanish conquest which broke this productive system only to replace it with a feudal system which was inferior in productivity[2] *(Seven Essays*, pp. 3-5). This economic system which characterized the colony was, then, a feudal implantation on the remnants of a Socialist economy (p. 4). Independence — which, like the conquest, resulted from a political-military act — marked the beginning of another stage in Peru's economic evolution. Although the founding of the Republic opened the doors to British (and eventually U.S. Capital) the feudal *gamonal* system persisted almost untouched in the Sierra. The basic economic system for most of the population did not change, nor did the conditions of the great mass of citizenry. Modern British and American Capital did, however, make inroads in the coastal area, where guano and other minerals were readily exploited, and where modern capitalist methods were introduced in agriculture.

Mariátegui was applying a Marxist method to penetrate to the essential economic realities which predominated in Peru. The application of Marxist methodology (which focused on economic and class factors) caused many of his contemporaries to criticize his work for being a servile application of Marxism to the Peruvian and Latin American reality. [3] The applicability of his method and the clarity of this analysis seem, however, to have withstood the years.

Mariátegui's analysis was not dogmatic and was considered, in a critical article by the Russian, Miroshevsky, to be of questionable Marxist orthodoxy. [4] His analysis of Peruvian reality saw the simultaneous existence of three economic systems: the European feudalism which Spain implanted; the remnants of the original Andean Indian communities (which he seems to have viewed as a carry-over from a primitive Communist economy); and a modern capitalist economy (with concomitant imperialist linkages) which was only found in certain coastal areas that were relatively free from the feudal dominance of the *gamonal.* This was an original contribution by Mariátegui and provided an excellent means of viewing a difficult — if not otherwise confusing — national reality. It is also an excellent example of how he fused Marxist theory to the concrete national conditions which were under analysis. Speaking of the then contemporary post-World War I period, Mariátegui suggested that it was characterized by the appearance of industry on the coast, the strengthening of the role of financial capital and the development of a capitalist class (which had previously been absent) and a consequent diminution of the power of the feudal aristocracy (pp. 14-15). [5] He further noted that the opening of the Panama Canal had contributed to the eclipse of British by American Capital. Thus even in the 7 *Ensayos* he foresaw the expansion of U.S. capital in Peru and implicitly into other Latin

American countries. Furthermore, he foresaw one pf the primary liabilities of such dominance by foreign capital — the fact that, in the face of foreign investment, it was very difficult to organize national development priorities which reflect the specific necessities of the national economy. (Rather they tended to reflect the specific interests of the New York- and London-based capital invested, p. 72). By way of making the givens in his analysis more explicit, the Peruvian further argued that Laissez-faire has given little to Peru, and "should be replaced by a social policy of nationalizing the great sources of wealth" (p. 72). Thus, we see how his analysis coincided with his originally stated purpose of making a "Socialist criticism of the problems and history of Peru (p. XXXVI).

One particular aspect of Mariátegui's Socialist critique — that which saw a sort of independent feudal latifundium — seems to coincide with the views of many main stream U.S. scholars as to the Latin American reality of that and later epochs. Interestingly enough, it does not, however, coincide with the views of many current Marxist scholars who, like Andre Gunder Frank *(Capitalism and Underdevelopment,* 1967), believe that these "feudal" entities are/were just one aspect of imperialist dominance, since they too contributed their products (almost exclusively primary goods) to the international capitalist markets. As to the latter point: First, one must wonder how Mariátegui's analysis (originally made in 1927 and 1928) would have changed as the phenomena he studied changed; and second, one also wonders how Gunder Frank *et. al.* would have classified the original European latifundium of the middle ages, which also sold many of its products to commercial dealers who, in turn , resold them in large trading centers which had hegemonic influence and international markets for their goods, *viz.* London, Paris and Genoa.

More generally, Mariátegui's treatment of the Indian becomes much more comprehensible, if we keep the nature of his focus in mind. Man, as per the Peruvian Marxist, is firmly rooted in his economic reality. The indigenous question, then, springs from the economy; it has its roots in the system of property ownership (p. 22). Studies which fail to recognize the fundamentally economic-social nature of the Indian problem "are but a sterile theoretical exercise destined to be completely discredited (p. 22)." Any chances for material or intellectual betterment of the Indian depend on changing the economic and social conditions in which he lives *(Ideología y política,* p. 31). The miserable conditions in which the Indian lives resulted not from any racial inferiority, but from economic and political realities. Indeed, the Peruvian believed the racial treatment of the Indian problem by bourgeois intellectuals only served to obscure the real problems in the continent (p. 21). A growing number of modern social scientists — Marxists or otherwise — would agree with these formulations, although some might suggest that cultural factors are more important than Mariátegui believes them to be. It is, however, impressive that the Peruvian thinker brought the underlying nature of this problem into such sharp focus at a time when

many were still lauding the value of a moralizing education or bemoaning the Indian's racial inferiority. We hasten to add that González Prada's writings undoubtedly aided Mariátegui in this analysis.

Mariátegui thought land tenure determined the political-administrative regime of a country. Peru, which still had, in large part, a feudal landholding system, did, then not yet have a bourgeois government, and lacked a strong bourgeois class. Indeed, he believed that the problem of agrarian production could not be remedied until feudalism was liquidated (pp. 31-34). This focus on the land tenure system and class formation was consistent with a Marxist emphasis on economics, but is not precisely equivalent to Marx's focus — "The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life" (Karl Marx, *Basis Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, 1959, p. 43). Here, Mariátegui has once again made a rather special adaptation (or interpretation) of Marxist | theory so as to be able to better explain the Peruvian national reality. In so doing, he was able to more adequately explain the conditions he was studying, and to offer a more viable solution to the implicit problems in such a situation. His answer to the problems of the land, the Indians, and production was simple — the nationalization of the land, but under certain specific conditions. It was not, for instance, to be re-organized into state farms, or broken up into small plots for each peasant. Some land would (in the short run) even continue to be worked by modern capitalist corporations (under tight state control) as long as this proved to be the most efficient means of production. The vast majority of the land would, however, be given to the Indian peasants who worked it, either through the revitalization of the traditional communal *ayllu* (which could gradually be converted into the cell of the modern Socialist State) or through the formation of technically capable agrarian cooperatives ("Principios de la política agraria nacional," in *Peruanecemos al Perú*, pp. 108-11).

These formulations — which envisioned modern organizational methods, technical assistance, education and necessary capital investment — demonstrate Mariátegui's ability to creatively fuse basic Socialist doctrine (nationalization) with specific national conditions (Indian communal *ayllus*, the peasant tradition of communal labor), and a pragmatic appreciation for the necessities at hand (the possible need to continue certain modern capitalist agriculture for a limited period, and to avoid the creation of very small land holdings which would not be economically viable) so as to guarantee adequate production in the early stages of the Socialist State, and thus more adequately insure the success of the Socialist Revolution. Implicit in the analysis, then, were precisely the type of solutions which the Peruvian military has implemented since their take-over in 1968. Mariátegui's obvious influence on their policies would once again seem to underline not only the importance of the *pensador* and *ensayista* in Latin American society, but would suggest just how great the influence of Latin American letters has been on Latin American politics generally. Likewise, one begins to under-

stand why in today's Peru the 7 *Ensayos* is read with equal enthusiasm by *militares* and *marxistas* alike, and why it has become one of Peru's all time best sellers.

NOTAS

1. The first English edition appeared in 1971 *(Seven Essays in Interpretation of Peruvian Reality,* translated by Marjory Urquidi, Austin: University of Texas Press), but was preceded by the Russian edition (1963) by eight years. Editions in French and Italian appeared in 1968 and 1972 respectively, and a Portuguese edition (Sao Paulo: Editora Alfa-Omega) appeared in 1975.
2. See Chapters I, II, and III of the 7 *Ensayos, Peruanecemos al Perú,* Vol. 11, *Obras Completas* (Lima: Biblioteca Amauta, 2nd ed., 1972), and *Ideología y política,* Vol. 13, *Obras Completas* (Lima: Biblioteca Amauta, 3rd ed., 1972).
3. See especially the "Catholic" criticism of the 7 *Ensayos* which Victór Andrés Belaunde levels in *La realidad nacional* (Paris: Editorial "Le Livre Libre," 1931).
4. V. Miroshevsky, "El populismo en el Perú, papel de Mariátegui en la historia del pensamiento social Latino-Americano," *Dialectica* (Havana) I, No. 1 (May-June, 1942), 41-59.
5. Page numbers are from the English edition of the *7 Ensayos,* unless otherwise indicated.