

Book Review

José Carlos Mariátegui: An Anthology

by Harry E. Vanden and Marc Becker, editors and translators. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2011. \$29.95 US, paper. ISBN: 978-1-58367-245-7. Pages: 1-480.

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José Carlos Mariátegui, the noted Peruvian Marxist activist and intellectual, wrote in 1925 that “each era wishes to have its own sense of the world” (p.386-387). To create a ‘sense of the world’ – achieved through a contextual and historical analysis of the contemporary reality – for Mariátegui is the opening for transforming the dominant social relations. Harry E. Vanden and Marc Becker in their introduction to the anthology put forward Mariátegui as an important non-dogmatic Marxist thinker worth our attention amidst unfolding global political and economic crises. As a major influence on Latin American heterodox approaches to Marxism as well as other critical intellectual trends including decolonialist, dependency, and liberation theology perspectives, Mariátegui has been an important reference for many movements and political actors from the region in their challenges to neoliberalism and global capitalism.

Mariátegui’s *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* (first published as a collection in 1928), representing one of the first comprehensive Marxist text from a Latin American perspective, is an examination of the racial and class relations and the underlying vestiges of colonial feudalism in Peru’s political economy. Beyond this publication, much of Mariátegui’s writing appears in the form of short articles and essays that were printed in newspapers and popular critical journals, as well as printed discourses to unions and political organizations. Many of these texts, rarely translated into English, provide the basis for much of this anthology.

Mariátegui was born on June 14th, 1894 in Moquegua, Peru, a small southern provincial capital, and raised in a working-class household by his single-mother. He began a career in journalism at the Lima news-

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paper *La Prensa* where he eventually began writing on high society, literature and art. In 1919, Mariátegui and César Falcón founded the political paper *La Razon*. Both Falcón and Mariátegui were exiled to Europe by the military government of Augusto Leguía in October 1919 for their radical and critical viewpoints. In the following four years, Mariátegui spent time in Barcelona, Paris and northern Italy where he was exposed to the revolutionary-focused writing of Georges Sorel and Italian critical thinkers in Turin and became a committed Marxist. Returning to Peru in 1923, he was invited to lecture at the Universidad Popular and interacted with organized labour in Lima. Mariátegui continued to be a target of surveillance and political imprisonment by the Leguía government, which exacerbated his already poor health. Mariátegui's intellectual endeavours increased in this period: he founded the socialist-focused journal *Amauta* – meaning “teacher” in Kichwa – in 1926, participated in the formation of the Partido Socialista del Peru (Socialist Party of Peru) in 1928, and published the *Seven Interpretative Essays* in the same year. Deteriorating health and ongoing political pressure encouraged Mariátegui to consider leaving Peru once again in 1930; Mariátegui died that year on April 15th from health complications that had persisted for most of his life.

One of Mariátegui's greatest contributions to a revolutionary Marxist perspective stems from his emphasis on mutual interactions of the working class and indigenous people as potentially creative producers of new social realities. Mariátegui argued that in Peru the “Indian Problem” – better understood he argues as the “Problem of Land” – emerged not from racial or cultural differences but the inequalities created by the colonial political economy and its particular vestiges left by an incomplete liberal revolution (p.69-115). Mariátegui noted the resistance and resilience of indigenous people throughout the colonial process: the history of indigenous struggles against colonialism (p.147) and the continued reproduction of alternative non-capitalist and non-feudalist relations of production in contemporary indigenous communities (p.97). Challenging Marxist scepticism of rural ‘peasantry’, Mariátegui encouraged the urban proletariat to form an engaged relationship with indigenous activists as equal participants in the revolutionary transformation of the Peruvian political economy (p.142; 239; 322). For Mariátegui, a socialist revolution only emerges by a process of creative and collective engagement of people acting with an understanding of their historical realities.

Vanden and Becker have selected and organized selections in the anthology into thematic categories including sections on indigenismo,

myth, imperialism, women, and Marxism and socialism – which is based on a large selection from Mariátegui’s *Defence of Marxism*. Academics may find that Mariátegui’s brief articles individually rarely achieve theoretical or conceptual depth. Through the organization of the anthology, however, each theme develops into a more holistic perspective demonstrating the Peruvian’s complex and nuanced Marxist understanding. The trade off in this organization is that the chronological development of Mariátegui’s thought is obscured. As an activist intellectual, Mariátegui’s writing often responded to and engaged with particular historical moments and organizational relationships – particularly with other anti-imperialist movements in Peru and the developing influence of the Comintern in South America. A pragmatic intellectual engagement that responded to the immediate political situation underlined important parts of Mariátegui’s thought. While reading this anthology the reader should reflect on the contextual development of his arguments.

Mariátegui’s prose in rare moments suffers from the translation, which leads to awkward phrasing and the loss of some of the nuances. Unfortunately notes were not written by the translators to explain their difficulties and translation choices. In the context of exposing an English-reading audience to Mariátegui, however, the anthology is very readable and fairly precise.

In the 1928 *Anniversary and Balance Sheet* at the end of *Amauta*’s second publication year Mariátegui wrote: “History is endurance. The isolated cry, no matter how large its echo, is not valid; the constant continual persistent sermon is what matters. Ideas that are perfect, absolute, abstract, indifferent to the facts, to changing and moving reality do not work; ideas that are germinal, concrete, dialectic, workable, rich in potential and capable of movement do” (p.127). Mariátegui is a powerful example of an engaged intellectual whose ideas have contributed to Latin America’s political transformations; greater attention by English readers is long overdue. Vanden and Becker’s anthology is an encouraging start.