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From Marx to Morales: Indigenous Socialism and the Latin Americanization of Marxism

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Over the past decade, a new rise of mass struggles in Latin America has sparked an encounter between revolutionists of that region and many of those based in the imperialist countries. In many of these struggles, as in Bolivia under the presidency of Evo Morales, Indigenous peoples are in the lead.

Latin American revolutionists are enriching Marxism in the field of theory as well as of action. This article offers some introductory comments indicating ways in which their ideas are linking up with and drawing attention to important but little-known aspects of Marxist thought.

Eurocentrism

A good starting point is provided by the comment often heard from Latin American revolutionists that much of Marxist theory is marked by a "Eurocentric" bias. They understand Eurocentrism as the belief that Latin American nations must replicate the evolution of Western European societies, through to the highest possible level of capitalist development, before a socialist revolution is possible. Eurocentrism is also understood to imply a stress on the primacy of industrialization for social progress and on the need to raise physical production in a fashion that appears to exclude peasant and Indigenous realities and to point toward the dissolution of Indigenous culture.[1]

Marx's celebrated statement that "no social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed"[2] is sometimes cited as evidence of a Eurocentric bias in Marxism. Karl Kautsky and Georgi Plekhanov, Marxist theorists of the pre-1914 period, are viewed as classic exponents of this view. Latin American writer Gustavo Pérez Hinojosa quotes Kautsky's view that "workers can rule only where the capitalist system has achieved a high level of development"[3] — that is, not yet in Latin America.

The pioneer Marxists in Latin America before 1917 shared that perspective. But after the Russian Revolution a new current emerged, now often called "Latin American Marxism." Argentine theorist Néstor Kohan identifies the pioneer Peruvian Communist José Carlos Mariátegui as its founder. Mariátegui, Kohan says, "opposed Eurocentric schemas and populist efforts to rally workers behind different factions of the bourgeoisie" and "set about recapturing 'Inca communism' as a precursor of socialist struggles." [4]

National subjugation

Pérez Hinojosa and Kohan both take for granted that Latin American struggles today, as in Mariátegui's time, combine both anti-imperialist and socialist components. This viewpoint links back to the analysis advanced by the Communist International in Lenin's time of a world divided between imperialist nations and subjugated peoples.[5] Is this framework still relevant at a time when most poor countries have formal independence? The central role of

anti-imperialism in recent Latin American struggles would seem to confirm the early Communist International's analysis.

Pérez Hinojosa tells us that Mariátegui recognized the impossibility of national capitalist development in semi-colonial countries like Peru. The revolution would be "socialist from its beginnings but would go through two stages" in realizing the tasks first of bourgeois democratic and then of socialist revolution. Moreover, the Peruvian theorist held that "this socialist revolution would be marked by a junction with the historic basis of socialization: the Indigenous communities, the survivals of primitive agrarian communism." [6]

Subsequently, says Kohen, the "brilliant team of the 1920s," which included Julio Antonio Mella in Cuba, Farabundo Martí in El Salvador, and Ruben Dario in Nicaragua, "was replaced ... by the echo of Stalin's mediocre schemas in the USSR," which marked a return to a mechanical "Eurocentrist" outlook. [7]

Writing from the vantage point of Bolivia's tradition of Indigenous insurgency, Alvaro García Linera attributes Eurocentric views in his country to Marxism as a whole, as expressed by both Stalinist and Trotskyist currents. He states that Marxism's "ideology of industrial modernisation" and "consolidation of the national state" implied the "'inferiority' of the country's predominantly peasant societies." [8]

Cuban revolution

In Kohen's view, the grip of "bureaucratism and dogmatism" was broken "with the rise of the Cuban revolution and the leadership of Castro and Guevara." [9] Guevara's views are often linked to those of Mariátegui with regard to the nature of Latin American revolution — in Guevara's words, either "a socialist revolution or a caricature of a revolution." [10] That claim was based on convictions regarding the primacy of consciousness and leadership in revolutionary transitions that were also held by Mariátegui.

Guevara also applied this view to his analysis of the Cuban state and of Stalinized Soviet reality. Guevara inveighed against the claim of Soviet leaders of his time that rising material production would bring socialism, despite the political exclusion, suffering, and oppression imposed on the working population. [11] (See "Che Guevara's Final Verdict on Soviet Economy," in [Socialist Voice, June 9, 2008](#).)

Marx's views

In Kohen's opinion, the Cuban revolution's leading role continued in the 1970s, when it "revived the revolutionary Marxism of the 1920s (simultaneously anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist) as well as Marx's more unfamiliar works—above all his later works that study colonialism and peripheral and dependent societies. In these writings Marx overcomes the Eurocentric views of his youth." [12]

Kohen identifies the insights of the "Late Marx" as follows:

- History does not follow an unvarying evolutionary path.
- Western Europe does not constitute a single evolutionary centre through which stages of historical development are radiated outwards to the rest of the world.
- "Subjugated peoples do not experience 'progress' so long as they remain under the boot of imperialism." [13]

Latin American thought here rests on the mature Marx's views on capitalism's impact on colonial societies, such as Ireland. It also intersects with Marx's late writings and research known to us primarily through Teodor Shanin's *Late Marx and the Russian Road*. [14] Shanin's book can now be usefully reread as a commentary on today's Latin American struggles.

Marx devoted much of his last decade to study of Russia and of Indigenous societies in North America. His limited writings on these questions focused on the Russian peasant commune, the *mir*, which then constituted the social foundation of agriculture in that country.

Russia's peasant communes

The Russian Marxist circle led by Plekhanov, ancestor of the Bolshevik party, believed that the *mir* was doomed to disappear as Russia was transformed by capitalist development. We now know that Marx did not agree. In a letter to Vera Zasulich, written in 1881 but not published until 1924, he wrote that "the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia." The "historical inevitability" of the evolutionary course mapped out in *Capital*, he stated, is "expressly restricted to *the countries of Western Europe*." [15]

The preliminary drafts of Marx's letter, included in Shanin's book, display essential agreement with the view of the revolutionary populist current in Russia, the "People's Will," that the commune could coexist harmoniously with a developing socialist economy. [16]

Ethnological Notebooks

These drafts drew on Marx's extensive studies of Indigenous societies during that period, a record of which is available in his little-known *Ethnological Notebooks*. [17] We find his conclusions summarized in a draft of his letter to Zasulich: "The vitality of primitive communities was incomparably greater than that of Semitic, Greek, Roman, etc. societies, and, *a fortiori*, that of modern capitalist societies." [18]

In her study of these notebooks, Christine Ward Gaily states that where such archaic forms persist, Marx depicts them fundamentally "as evidence of resistance to the penetration of state-associated institutions," which he views as intrinsically oppressive. [19] The clear implication is that such archaic survivals should be defended and developed.

The Marxists of Lenin's time were not aware of this evolution in Marx's thinking. Thus Antonio Gramsci could write, a few weeks after the Russian October uprising, "This is the revolution against Karl Marx's *Capital*. In Russia, Marx's *Capital* was more the book of the bourgeoisie than of the proletariat." [20] Yet despite their limited knowledge of Marx's views, the revolutionary generation of Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Bukharin, Gramsci, and Lukács reasserted Marx's revolutionary stance in combat with the "Eurocentrist" view associated with Karl Kautsky and the pre-war Socialist International that socialist revolution must await capitalism's fullest maturity and collapse.

Shanin generalizes from Marx's approach to Russia in 1881 in a way that links to a second characteristic of Latin American revolution. "The purest forms of 'scientific socialism' ... invariably proved politically impotent," he argues. "It has been the integration of Marxism with the indigenous [i.e. home-grown] political traditions which has underlain all known cases of internally generated and politically effective revolutionary transformation of society by socialists." [21]

Here we have a second field of correlation with the Latin American revolutionary experience, with its strong emphasis on associating the movement for socialism with the tradition of anti-colonial struggle associated with the figures of the great aboriginal leaders and of Bolívar, Martí, and Sandino. This fusion of traditions emerges as a unique strength of Latin American Marxism.

Mariátegui captured this thought in a well-known passage:

"We certainly do not wish socialism in America to be a copy and imitation. It must be a heroic creation. We must give life to an Indo-American socialism reflecting our own reality and in our own language." [22]

Following the October revolution of 1917, Marx's vision of the *mir's* potential was realized in practice. The *mir* had been in decline for decades, and by 1917 half the peasants' land was privately owned. But in the great agrarian reform of 1917-18, the peasants revived the *mir* and adopted it as the basic unit of peasant agriculture. During the next decade, peasant communes co-existed constructively with the beginnings of a socialist economy. By 1927, before the onset of Stalinist forced collectivization, 95% of peasant land was already communally owned.[23]

There is a double parallel here with present Latin American experience. First, the Bolsheviks' alliance with the peasantry is relevant in Latin American countries where the working class, in the strict sense of those who sell their labour power to employers, is often a minority in broad coalitions of exploited producers. Second, survivals of primitive communism, including communal landholding, are a significant factor in Indigenous struggles across this region.

National emancipation

A third correspondence can be found in the Bolsheviks' practice toward minority peoples of the East victimized and dispossessed by Tsarist Russian settler colonialism. Too often, discussions of the Bolsheviks' policy on the national question stop short with Stalin and Lenin's writings of 1913-1916, ignoring the evolution of Bolshevik policy during and after the 1917 revolution. Specifically:

- The later Bolsheviks did not limit themselves to the criteria of nationhood set out by Stalin in 1913.[24] They advocated and implemented self-determination for oppressed peoples who were not, at the time of the 1917 revolution, crystallized nations or nationalities.
- They went beyond the concept that self-determination could be expressed only through separation. Instead, they accepted the realization of self-determination through various forms of federation.
- They implemented self-determination in a fashion that was not always territorial.
- Their attitude toward the national cultures of minority peoples was not neutral. Instead, they committed substantial political and state resources to planning and encouraging the development of these cultures.[25]

On all these points, the Bolshevik experience closely matches the revolutionary policies toward Indigenous peoples now being implemented in Bolivia and other Latin American countries.

Ecology and materialism

Finally, a word on ecology. The boldest governmental statements on the world's ecological crisis are coming from Cuba, Bolivia, and other anti-imperialist governments in Latin America.[26] The influence of Indigenous struggles is felt here. Bolivian President Evo Morales points to the leading role of Indigenous peoples, "called upon by history to convert ourselves into the vanguard of the struggle to defend nature and life." [27]

This claim rests on an approach by many Indigenous movements to ecology that is inherently revolutionary. Most First-World ecological discussion focuses on technical and market devices, such as carbon trading, taxation, and offsets, that aim to preserve as much as possible of a capitalist economic system that is inherently destructive to the natural world. Indigenous movements, by contrast, begin with the demand for a new relationship of humankind to our natural environment, sometimes expressed in the slogan, "Liberate Mother Earth." [28]

These movements often express their demand using an unfamiliar terminology of ancestral spiritual wisdom — but behind those words lies a worldview that can be viewed as a form of materialism.

In pre-conquest Andean society, says Peruvian Indigenous leader Rosalía Paiva, "Each was a part of all, and all were of the soil. The soil could never belong to us because we are its sons and daughters, and we belong to the soil." [29]

Bolivian Indigenous writer Marcelo Saavedra Vargas holds that "It is capitalist society that rejects materialism. It makes war on the material world and destroys it. We, on the other hand, embrace the material world, consider ourselves part of it, and care for it." [30]

This approach is reminiscent of Marx's thinking, as presented by John Bellamy Foster in *Marx's Ecology*. It is entirely appropriate to interpret "Liberate Mother Earth" as equivalent to "close the metabolic rift." [31]

Hugo Chávez says that in Venezuela, 21st Century Socialism will be based not only on Marxism but also on Bolivarianism, Indigenous socialism, and Christian revolutionary traditions. [32] Latin American Marxism's capacity to link up in this way with what Shanin calls vernacular revolutionary traditions is a sign of its vitality and promise.

I will conclude with a story told by the Peruvian Marxist and Indigenous leader Hugo Blanco. A member of his community, he tells us, conducted some Swedish tourists to a Quechua village near Cuzco. Impressed by the collectivist spirit of the Indigenous community, one of the tourists commented, "*This is like communism.*"

"No," responded their guide, "*Communism is like this.*" [33]

Related Reading

- Hugo Blanco. [The Fight for Indigenous Rights in the Andes Today](#) [pdf]
- John Riddell. [COMINTERN: Revolutionary Internationalism in Lenin's Time](#) [pdf]
- John Riddell. [The Russian Revolution and National Freedom](#)

Footnotes

[1] "Alvaro García Linera, "Indianismo and Marxism" (translated by Richard Fidler), in [Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#).

David Bedford, "Marxism and the Aboriginal Question: The Tragedy of Progress," in *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1994), 102-103.

Hugo Blanco Galdos, letter to the author, December 17, 2007.

[2] Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969, vol. 1, p. 504.

[3] Gustavo Pérez Hinojosa, "La heterodoxia marxista de Mariátegui." [Rebelión, October 30, 2007](#).

[4] Néstor Kohan, "El marxismo latinoamericano y la crítica del eurocentrismo," in *Con sangre en las venas*, Mexico: Ocean Sur, 2007, pp. 10, 11.

[5] See, for example, V.I. Lenin's report on the National and Colonial Questions to the Communist International's second congress, in *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969, vol. 31, pp. 240-41; and the subsequent congress discussion and resolution, in John Riddell, ed., *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1991, vol. 1, pp. 216-290.

- [6] Hinojosa, "Mariátegui."
- [7] Kohen, "Eurocentrismo," p. 10.
- [8] García Linera, "Indianismo."
- [9] Kohen, "Eurocentrismo," p. 10.
- [10] Ernesto Che Guevara, "Message to the Tricontinental," in *Che Guevara Reader*, Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2003, p. 354.
- [11] See, for example, "Algunas reflexiones sobre la transición socialista," in Ernesto Che Guevara, *Apuntes críticos a la Economía Política*, Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2006, pp. 9-20.
- [12] Kohan, "Eurocentrismo," pp. 10-11.
- [13] *Ibid.*, p. 11
- [14] Teodor Shanin, ed., *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the "Peripheries of Capitalism"*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983.
- [15] Shanin, *Late Marx*, p. 124.
- [16] *Ibid.*, p. 12, 102-103.
- [17] Lawrence Krader, ed., *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*, Assen, NE: Van Gorcum, 1972.
- [18] Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989, vol. 24, pp. 358-59.
- [19] Christine Ward Gailey, "Community, State and Questions of Social Evolution in Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks*," in *Anthropologica*, vol. 45 (2003), pp. 47-48.
- [20] Antonio Gramsci, "[The Revolution against *Das Kapital*](#)"
- [21] Shanin, *Late Marx*, p. 255.
- [22] Marc Becker, "Mariátegui, the Comintern, and the Indigenous Question in Latin America," in *Science & Society*, vol. 70 (2006), no. 4, p. 469, quoting from José Carlos Mariátegui, "Anniversario y Balance" (1928).
- [23] Moshe Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1968, p. 85.
- [24] J.V. Stalin, "Marxism and the National Question," in *Works*, Moscow: FLPH, 1954, vol. 2, p. 307.
- [25] See Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-23*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999;
John Riddell, "The Russian Revolution and National Freedom." [Socialist Voice, November 1, 2006](#).
- [26] See, for example, Evo Morales, Felipe Perez Roque, "Bolivia and Cuba Address the UN: Radical Action Needed Now to Stop Global Warming." [Socialist Voice, September 26, 2007](#).
- [27] *Ibid.*

[28] From a presentation by Vilma Amendra of the Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca (Colombia) at York University, Friday, January 11, 2008.

[29] Address to Bolivia Rising meeting in Toronto, April 5, 2008.

[30] Interview with Marcelo Saavedra Vargas, April 21, 2008.

[31] John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.

[32] See, for example, speech by Chávez on December 15, 2006, summarized in "Chávez Calls for United Socialist Party of Venezuela." [*Socialist Voice*, January 11, 2007.](#)

[33] Blanco's remarks to an informal gathering in Toronto, September 16, 2008.