

Indigeneity and Labour: Contested Class Struggles

INTRODUCTION

The first part of *Itinerant Ideas* addresses the well-established argument that the construction of racial stereotypes about indigenous peoples in Latin America has gone hand in hand with the exercise of political and economic power, and more specifically with the exploitation of labour and the expropriation of land.¹ One of the most renowned intellectual figures to talk in these terms and to make such terms part of a widespread conversation in the early twentieth century was the Peruvian journalist, essayist and philosopher José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930)—“Latin America’s foremost Marxist thinker”, in the words of French-Brazilian sociologist Michael Löwy.² Via books, conference papers and journal publications, Mariátegui urged his contemporaries to “give life to an Indo-American socialism reflecting our own reality and in our own language.”³ As he told it, that “reality” was a simple one: the peasantry in early twentieth-century Peru constituted the majority of the exploited masses and therefore had to form the basis of any revolutionary movement. Mariátegui also made the crucial point that the peasantry in Peru and the wider region was predominantly indigenous. He wrote of the “practical socialism” that he saw in contemporary indigenous rural life—a collectivist tradition that dated back to the pre-Columbian Inca past. To his mind, such a long-standing

¹ Gotkowitz, Introduction to *Histories of Race and Racism*, p. 11.

² ‘Mariátegui’s Heroic Socialism—Interview with Michael Löwy’, *Jacobin*, 15 December 2018.

³ ‘Aniversario y balance’, *Amauta* 3, (September 1928), p. 3.

collectivist tradition and natural solidarity would ensure the resonance of socialist ideas, and therefore the development of a powerful communist movement in Peru.

Apart from the three years he spent in Europe in the early 1920s, Mariátegui did not travel very much.⁴ He had many health problems linked to a serious leg injury he suffered as a child and, as a result, spent most of his life in or around Lima.⁵ He only went once to the Peruvian sierra (Huancayo), and then not for more than a few weeks.⁶ In 1929, Mariátegui spoke of relocating to Buenos Aires. He had not been to Argentina before, or indeed to any other Latin American country. Why did he want to leave Peru at this point? “For the last five years I have faced a difficult struggle in Peru”, he explained in a letter dated 27 December 1929, but it had recently gotten much worse: the police had raided his home, taken all his papers, and placed him under house arrest. The recipient of this letter was Chilean novelist and popular chronicler Joaquín Edwards Bello (1887–1968).⁷ Mariátegui told Edwards Bello that he wanted to travel to Buenos Aires via Valparaíso and Santiago so he could “embrace [his] Chilean friends” and “get a brief glimpse of the country”. But he never made it to Chile or Argentina. He died on 16 April 1930 at the age of just thirty-five.

So, Mariátegui did not travel around Latin America and hardly travelled within Peru. But his writings *did* travel. In a recent commemorative publication, the Aymara writer José Luis Ayala describes how Mariátegui’s avant-garde journal *Amauta* (1926–1930) circulated throughout Peru “due to the networks of agents that Mariátegui built up”. He tells the story, for example, of Vicente Mendoza Díaz and his brother Julio who were responsible for taking copies of *Amauta* and Mariátegui’s seminal *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* (1928) from Lima to

⁴ Mariátegui travelled to Paris via New York in October 1919. As Nicola Miller tells us, the Parisian climate did not suit his fragile health, so he moved on to Rome within a couple of months. He stayed in Italy until June 1922. From there he travelled to Munich, Vienna, Berlin, Prague, and Budapest, before returning to Lima in March 1923. See *Reinventing Modernity*, pp. 150–152.

⁵ From 1924, when his right leg was amputated, Mariátegui was permanently in a wheelchair.

⁶ Alberto Flores Galindo, *La agonía de Mariátegui: La polémica con la Komintern* (Lima: DECSO, 1980), p. 41.

⁷ The letter is available via the digital archive of Chile’s National Library—<http://www.bibliotecanacionaldigital.gob.cl>.

Huancané.⁸ Nicola Miller singles out *Siete ensayos* as a “canonical work” which has had a lasting influence not just in Peru but across the entire region.⁹ And Peruvian politician Sergio Tejada talks of this text finding “its way around the globe”.¹⁰

Circulation is not a given or incidental occurrence.¹¹ Mariátegui himself played a central role in ensuring the dissemination of his writings as did many other individuals. Sometimes the people enabling the circulation of Mariátegui’s vision of Indo-American socialism were formal distributors, i.e. publishing houses that were paid to do the work. Sometimes they were colleagues and friends, such as Gamaliel Churata (director of *Boletín Titikaka* in Puno) or Joaquín García Monge (director of *Repertorio Americano* in San José, Costa Rica), who used their own magazines to promote his work (as he did for them through *Amauta*). Sometimes they were young students like the Mendoza Díaz brothers who carried his *Siete ensayos* and *Amauta* from the Peruvian capital to the rural hinterland in their bags.

Mariátegui’s private correspondence further emphasises the significance of individual agency in the spread of ideas. His letters allow us to build up a picture of how individuals connected to one another and functioned as part of a broader network. When Mariátegui wrote to Edwards Bello about his impending trip to Chile in 1929, he told his friend:

Concha Romero James told me the copy of *7 Ensayos de Interpretación de la Realidad Peruana* that I dedicated to you never arrived. I am sending on another copy today. Let me know when you get this, and if you received the book by Eguren./ The bearer of this letter is the nicest person: Blanca del Prado, a young and admirable poet of the ‘Amauta’ group. She does not yet have intellectual connections beyond Peru. [...] / ‘Amauta’ is most fond of her. It holds you in great esteem too.

Mariátegui wanted to make sure Edwards Bello got a dedicated copy of his new book—an indication of how books could help to consolidate

⁸ See special issue of the *Boletín Casa Museo José Carlos Mariátegui* (No. 100, January–March 2019), entitled ‘100 Intelectuales saludan a Mariátegui’, p. 10.

⁹ Miller, *Reinventing Modernity*, p. 144.

¹⁰ In ‘100 Intelectuales saludan a Mariátegui’, p. 22.

¹¹ Gänger, ‘Circulation’, p. 312.

personal relationships, regardless of their thematic content.¹² In other words, the *fact* of exchange was as important as *what* was being exchanged. Still, Edwards Bello was likely receptive to, or at least interested in, what Mariátegui had to say in *Siete ensayos*. He was a member of the Radical Party, socialised with leftist writers like Pablo Neruda, and was consistently critical of Chilean elites, for their lack of nationalism and indifference toward the plight of the working classes, and of the state's propensity to violently suppress—rather than engage with the social problems highlighted by—labour protests.¹³

As well as sharing his own work, Mariátegui was keen to promote the writings of the Peruvian avant-garde poet José María Eguren (1874–1942).¹⁴ His presentation letter also spoke of the Arequipa-born writer Blanca del Prado (1903–1979). Mariátegui ensured a direct encounter between her and Edwards Bello, with praise for each of them via *Amauta* (it was “most fond” of her and held him “in great esteem”) intended as the glue to initiate a collaborative Chilean-Peruvian relationship.¹⁵ For Blanca del Prado, this represented a significant milestone; as Mariátegui commented, it would be her first foray into the transnational intellectual sphere.

The last person to feature in Mariátegui's 1929 letter is the Mexican cultural diplomat Concha Romero James (1900–1987), who would soon

¹² For an excellent account of the significance of books as objects of exchange see Patience Schell, *The Sociable Sciences: Darwin and His Contemporaries in Chile* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹³ By 1929, Edwards Bello had already published *El roto* (1920), an implicitly political novel about “the Santiago lumpenproletariat” that was positively reviewed in *Amauta*. He had also published a collection of essays *Nacionalismo continental* (1925), which was at least partly a response to and celebration of the anti-imperialism of Peruvian activist Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre. Edwards Bello was also a prolific journalist, and he used his newspaper columns to speak out against government-authorised atrocities such as the massacre of nitrate workers in Iquique in 1907. See Gerald Martin, ‘Literature, Music and the Visual Arts, 1870–1930’, in Leslie Bethell (ed.), *A Cultural History of Latin America*, p. 119, and Barr Melej, *Reforming Chile*, pp. 124–126.

¹⁴ The “book of Eguren” was likely *Poesías*, published by Mariátegui's Editorial Minerva that same year.

¹⁵ Del Prado published poems in *Amauta* in 1929 and 1930. In Chile, she collaborated with the *Revista de Educación* and corresponded with Mariátegui about sending copies of *Amauta* and *Siete ensayos* to this magazine. Carlos Manuel Cox invited Edwards Bello to participate in *Amauta* in 1927 and it publicised his books *El roto* and *Un chileno en Madrid*. See Beverly Adams and Natalia Majluf, *Redes de vanguardia: Amauta y América Latina, 1926–1930* (Lima: Asociación Museo de Arte de Lima, 2019), p. 291.

take on the role of assistant chief of the Pan American Union's Division of Intellectual Cooperation.¹⁶ It was she who informed Mariátegui that the first copy of *Siete ensayos* had not reached Edwards Bello—an indication that she was familiar with the epistolary and object exchanges of both intellectuals. And she seemed to take it upon herself to intervene when she became aware of blockages in the system. Exactly how important Romero James was to Mariátegui as a *porteur* of his ideas and writings, or at least how important she perceived herself (and her husband, Earle K. James) to be, comes across more clearly still in a letter that she wrote to the Peruvian Marxist philosopher in September 1928:

I have not forgotten the wonderful time spent at your home when I was passing through Lima. It is one of the best memories I have of Peru's beautiful capital.

I need to ask a big favour of you. As you will remember, I told you my husband writes for various North American newspapers and magazines, such as *The New York Times*, *Current History*, [and] *The Arts* [...]. He's just sent me an urgent telegram [...] as he's been contracted by *The New York Times* to write a series of articles on Latin American authors [...] If you could recommend any books, I would be hugely grateful. I would be even more grateful if you and your friends could send your own books, and he can help to disseminate and publicise them in the U.S.

Such publicity is no small thing. In the case of *La Vorágine*, within a few weeks of my husband publishing his review in *The Times*, all copies in Bogotá had sold out...¹⁷

Romero James wrote this letter from Chile. It shows that she had been moving between Chile and Peru: she was in Peru just prior to going to Chile, and she wrote of going back there soon, via Bolivia and Argentina. This time she wanted to visit Cuzco and said she would shortly be asking Mariátegui for contact details of people there—"interesting people who are concerned about the Indian problem." Her letter then finished with a post-note suggesting that Mariátegui "write something on the

¹⁶Whilst working for the Pan American Union, Romero James set up one of the initial models of contemporary art information exchange with the newsletter *Correo*. She also prepared overviews of literature on and from Latin America, such as the *Annotated Bibliography of Latin American Literature*, published in 1939. See Claire Fox, *Making Art Pan American: Cultural Policy and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

¹⁷Letter dated 16 September 1928. Accessible through the Archivo José Carlos Mariátegui, at <http://104.236.95.101/index.php/carta-de-concha-romero-james-1928-09-16>.

reestablishment of relations between Chile and Peru, for a Chilean newspaper or magazine.”¹⁸ “I think they would welcome a piece from you”, she said, “on this or any other issue.” She pressed home the importance of “re-start[ing] intellectual relations between these countries!!” and, in such a context, presented herself as a critical cross-border mediator: “If you’d like, I can help to open doors here for Peruvian writers, and I can also arrange for Chileans to send writings to you in Peru.”

Another person who sought to “open doors” for Mariátegui in Chile was Peruvian political militant Julián Petrovick (pseudonym for Federico Bolaño). Whilst in exile in Santiago in 1930, Petrovick wrote to Mariátegui:

I learnt all the details about what happened to you and other *compañeros* from Blanquita del Prado, and I’ve written to Argentina, Brazil and Central America about it. I anxiously await more news [...] I think there will be a meeting later this year for all of us who fight for the revolutionary ideal. I have great hopes for this meeting. *El Mercurio* said that you might attend. The next issue of ‘Letras’ will publish your portrait, as part of a brief commentary piece by me. If you could send something to include too, that would be wonderful [...] I want to make sure people here know who you are, and that they value your work.¹⁹

Blanca del Prado re-emerges here as an important emissary, passing on the news to Petrovick about Augusto Leguía’s repression of political dissidence in Peru. Petrovick spoke of mobilising his international connections across Latin America in defence of Mariátegui and other “comrades”. He also called attention to the visibility that he had through Chilean periodicals and how this could be used to promote Mariátegui’s work. His “commentary piece” on Mariátegui was to be published in the literary supplement of *El Mercurio*—meaning we have a notoriously right-wing newspaper encouraging Chilean readers to acquaint themselves with and value the work of a Peruvian Marxist thinker. In 1930, Petrovick aligned himself with the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA), which opposed the socialist vision of Indo-America promoted by Mariátegui. And yet the letter makes it clear that this Aprista would be writing about Mariátegui’s work in very positive terms. Possibly, he sought to re-present

¹⁸ That re-establishment of relations was made formal through the signing of the Treaty of Lima in 1929.

¹⁹ Letter dated 7 February 1930. Accessible through the Archivo José Carlos Mariátegui at <http://archivo.mariategui.org/index.php/carta-de-julian-petrovick-7-2-1930>.

Mariátegui's thinking to make it coincide with APRA's agenda. More likely, Petrovick perceived important connections between the two, and deemed Mariátegui's contributions to be worthy of dissemination *despite* the disagreements between Apristas and Communists. If the latter is an accurate summary, this is a good illustration of how debates about "the revolutionary ideal" taking place in Chile were able to cut across the party-political lines dividing the left in Peru.

Through these three letters we detect the depth and breadth of the transnational networks Mariátegui was involved in, and of the importance of the exchange of objects—in this case, mainly books and periodicals. We also begin to appreciate how Mariátegui's relationships were created and sustained by the act of letter writing. What makes Mariátegui particularly relevant to the first part of this book, exploring the link between race-making and the organisation of labour, is the fact that he interacted with Chilean intellectuals of different political affiliations, and, through them, ensured that his writings on the "indigenous problem" reached readers in Chile. Chile was also home to many Peruvian exiles through the 1930s who engaged with and interrogated Mariátegui's vision for socialist revolution in Latin America.

The first chapter of Part I begins by mapping out the formative years of the main political parties who claimed to speak for labour in early twentieth century Chile and Peru—the Communist and Socialist Parties in Chile, and the Socialist-turned-Communist Party and APRA in Peru—and highlights how they interacted with and were impacted by one another. It then investigates the heated discussions about the "Problem of Race" that took place at the First Conference of Communist Parties of Latin America (Buenos Aires, 1929), paying special attention to how Mariátegui brought Chile and Peru together in his defence of Indo-American Socialism. The third section of Chap. 2 traces the precarious alliances established between indigenous organisers and the Left in Chile and Peru during the 1920s and 1930s. The penultimate section zooms in on Peruvian Apristas living in Chile during the 1930s and 1940s, analysing how they impacted on the Chilean cultural and political scene and, vice versa, how the latter helped to shape Aprismo. Finally, Chap. 2 scrutinises the intellectual output of Riga-born Chilean Communist Alejandro Lipschutz (1883–1980), and how this related to Chilean national specificities as well as the institutionalisation of *indigenismo* at a hemispheric level during the 1940s. In all, Chap. 2 reveals "Indo-America" as a multi-authored narrative, in which both Chile and Peru played starring roles.

Chapter 3 focuses on the question of land ownership. After exploring Chilean-Peruvian intellectual and artistic exchanges (via Mexico) about the urgency of agrarian reform in defence of indigenous communities in the 1920s and 1930s, this chapter shows how successive governments in both countries proceeded to reduce indigenous land tenure over the course of the first half of the twentieth century. It then explores the transnational aspects of the violent cyclical history of dispossession, indigenous rebellion (against dispossession), and state repression (of rebellion) from the 1910s through 1930s. Finally, it shows how indigenous intellectuals in both countries made it clear that their problems with landowners and the state was not just about the economic worth of land.

The third chapter of Part I investigates Chilean-Peruvian conversations about indigenous labour that took place through the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the conferences it sponsored during the 1930s and 1940s. These conversations foregrounded the valuable contributions made to society by indigenous agricultural workers, whilst also denouncing the ways in which they had been neglected by evolving labour legislation. We also see how the *urban* indigenous worker became increasingly visible in cultural production and policy discussions. Building on these narratives, the penultimate part of Chap. 4 probes early-to mid-twentieth century debates about the relationship between indigenous art and industry, whilst the final section delves into the racialised dimensions of one specific aspect of labour legislation: public health. Here we glimpse how indigenous peoples were sometimes recast as the solution to—rather than the root of—national problems. All three chapters together press home my broader argument that the connections between race and the organisation (or control) of labour in Latin America are more fully understood when studied beyond, as well as within, the confines of each nation-state.