

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Mike Gonzalez, *In the Red Corner: The Marxism of José Carlos Mariátegui* (Chicago: Haymarket Books 2019)

Yuri Martins Fontes

Volume 87, Spring 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078665ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2021.0019>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Fontes, Y. (2021). Review of [Mike Gonzalez, *In the Red Corner: The Marxism of José Carlos Mariátegui* (Chicago: Haymarket Books 2019)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 87, 217–222. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2021.0019>

the Caribbean, but also linked to them as revolutions against a newly oppressive economic and moral order. Even as Atlantic Africa became more harmed and troubled, its people generated robust and resilient cultural institutions which flowed into the Atlantic, carrying with them experience establishing quilombos as sites of escape and resistance, Islamic notions of rights and freedoms, and much more. Green not only presents Africa's history as full-bodied, but also bridges the gap that so many historians assume divides the precolonial from the colonial, finding in the centuries before the European partition of the continent the roots of not only Africa's impoverishment relative to Europe, but also its contemporary politics of popular resistance to predatory elites.

The arguments in *Fistful of Shells* can be fitful at times, repeated in various contexts, interrupted by digressions, articulated with varying degrees of clarity. This book would be difficult to use as a whole in undergraduate teaching. A coda to Part I and a prologue to Part II, however, usefully bring the diverse case studies of the former and the overlapping essays of the latter into focus. Green is not persuasive on all points, but that is not really the point. He wants to provoke his readers to think about Africa differently, as dynamic, complex and connected. He draws causal chains together that are at least arguable – and often convincing – to fight the longstanding habit of not looking for these connections. Green examined archives around the Atlantic world to collect stories and artefacts which connote the legacies of Africans' historical presence in music, food, architecture and memory, and uses these to pointedly remind us that Africa remains woven into the Atlantic world today. For both Africanists and non-Africanists, this book sets by way of example a commanding challenge to finally dispense with

habits of mind dating from the Atlantic slave trade era which unwittingly reduce Africa's historical importance and generative power, and to start making the connections which reveal West Africa's dynamic history within its shores and within the Atlantic world.

PHILIP S. ZACHERNUK
Dalhousie University

Mike Gonzalez, *In the Red Corner: The Marxism of José Carlos Mariátegui* (Chicago: Haymarket Books 2019)

MIKE GONZALEZ'S BOOK brings to the English-speaking world an interesting overview of the life, thought and political praxis of José Carlos Mariátegui La Chira, a Peruvian Marxist who is considered one of the greatest thinkers in Latin America. In simple prose, without the intention of delving deeply into the debates he explores, Gonzalez fluently presents, in just over 200 pages, the Andean author's historical context and intellectual development, tracing a succinct and introductory description of his life and work.

In the opening chapters, he explores Mariátegui's personal and cultural background, sketching the steps of his trajectory towards Marxism: his activities as an activist journalist; his exile and eventual embrace of communism and other contemporary thinking in Europe; his work with the magazine *Amauta* (a term that would become his nickname, whose meaning in Quechua is "wise"), an editorial project that was proposed not only as a "group," but as a "movement" of "organic" intellectuals (in the concept of Gramsci), and that would be the basis of the construction of its "revolutionary nucleus." Later, the book approaches his classic work, *Seven Tests of Interpretation of the Peruvian Reality*; deals with the issues that involved the founding of the

Socialist Party in Peru, linked to the Third International; and points out elements of his dialectical conception of history, in addition to his main historiographical, political, and philosophical contributions.

If it is true that the Marxism of Mariátegui, a thinker from the periphery of the *peripheral* Latin American world, may be contrasted with the little that has been researched and written about him – especially in comparison to other great Marxists, such as Gramsci, Lukács, or Benjamin – it is also certain that this gap is even more unequal when it comes to works written in the English language. It could not be otherwise; the dominant discourse, which delimits and legitimizes *what is and what is not known*, is mostly expressed in English, a hegemonic language since the last century. Works written outside this standard tend, therefore, to go unnoticed – at least in the face of researchers with less capacity for otherness, whose reading is reduced to the repertoire of the great English-speaking centers.

Gonzalez, on the contrary, avoids this intellectual restriction. He shows himself to be an essayist open to new times, determined to meet the other, crossing the restricted linguistic and cognitive walls. Thus, the English author listens not only to the thinker in question, but to several Latin American scholars who have dealt with the topic, breaking with the rigid tradition of modern-bourgeois anglophone dominance – still so self-centered and monolingual – whose process of overcoming is advancing, but is far from achieving a healthy diversity. Emeritus Professor of Latin American Studies at the University of Glasgow, Gonzalez has the merit of knowing how to look – with sensitivity and breadth – at Latin American Marxism, offering with his work a didactic space so that the interested reader can approach the Marxist

current that, for some decades, has been termed *mariateguismo*.

However, if *In the Red Corner* stands out positively for this look at the other – a gesture that in itself already denotes a refusal of the ethnocentrism in force (above all, anglophone) – the book nevertheless lacks a certain Eurocentric rancidity, which is perceived in the course of reading. A minor mistake, but visible from the first pages, is that of presenting Mariátegui as if he were a “rediscovery”; a brilliant thinker, who had been a kind of hostage to deviant spirits for 60 years, that is, until his centenary, in 1994 (a date shown as a cabalistic number) who made him “suffer” by the obscure way they claimed his political heritage. That is, they silenced what would be, as Gonzalez suggests, true Mariateguian ideas.

In this sentence, the English academic demonstrates some ignorance of crucial authors on Latin American Marxism who took up and spread the thought of Amauta throughout the 20th century. This is the case of the Brazilians, Werneck Sodré and Florestan Fernandes, or of the Europeans, Antonio Melis and Robert Paris, in addition to countless great Hispanic-American thinkers, such as Aníbal Quijano (the latter, at least remembered throughout the book). In this period that Gonzalez supposes to be an eclipse, these various intellectuals brought Mariátegui’s conceptions to the intellectual and political debate of historical materialism in a mature, systematic and thorough manner. On the other hand, in terms of political praxis, properly speaking, one could not speak of an erased Mariátegui being now “rediscovered.” An analysis of his legacy points to a lot of political-historical activity, as seen in his frank influence in the Cuban Revolution and in several guerrilla struggles and rebellions of the middle of the last century, with Che Guevara being one of his most notable readers in the scope of

political power Marxism. These themes, however, are not dealt with in the book.

It is also worth noting – although an understandable fact, in the case of a work that certainly took years of reflection and studies – that, although Gonzalez's research has the virtue of paying attention to and at least touching on most of the key aspects discussed by the Peruvian thinker, his book does not engage with many recent contributions by contemporary authors who have been scrutinizing the considerable Mariáteguiian *oeuvre* with increasing dedication. In his bibliography on the Andean Marxist, with four dozen references, only six were published in the present century. Further, if we look at the exponential production dedicated to his thinking developed in the last decade (since 2010), this number drops to just three works, two in Spanish. It is possible to observe, therefore, a survey that comes to us somewhat late, considering the prolific Latin American production on Mariátegui in recent years, notably in Brazil and Hispanic America.

But let us pay attention to the objectives and merits of Gonzalez's work: it is an essay with a formative bias, which, as Mariátegui defended, is not tied to academic intellectualism – so restricted in its movements by good pay and comfortable position – but advances towards dialogue with the foundations and concrete action. It is this Mariátegui that Gonzalez presents to us quite clearly: a thinker of struggle who sees in the category of praxis one of the core elements of Marxism; a practicing intellectual, or even an activist with a theoretical background.

Mariátegui had relatively humble origins: dedicated and self-taught, a typographer since he was a teenager, later a journalist, his cultural and theoretical training took place in the troubled period between the wars, in a country that was not very industrialized and without the vigour of socialist ideas. In the case

of some of its great neighbors (Brazil, Argentina), this would be hastened by the immigration of activists fleeing European anti-socialist terror.

In the early 1920s, Mariátegui stood out as the powerful voice of workers in Lima and such action would take him to prison. After being freed, the tone of his intellectual and political output increased, gaining increasing popularity. With the rise of President Augusto Leguía, a modernizing, but authoritarian leader, Mariátegui was exiled to Europe. Here, it is worth a brief aside, the book has a gap, in suggesting that Leguía “offered” Mariátegui an observer position in the Peruvian cultural “mission” abroad, when, in reality, as is well documented, Mariátegui was forced into exile (although under the euphemism of a “mission”). Even his penalty could have been more serious, had it not been for the fact that Leguía was coincidentally married to one of his relatives.

Gonzalez continues his description, introducing us to Mariátegui in Europe, times when he would travel through several countries, making contact with surrealists and vitalist philosophies. In Rome, where he settled in his European passage, the Peruvian claims to have married “a woman and some ideas.” In this country, he would consolidate his socialist formation, going deeper into the ideas mainly of Lenin and Gramsci, and becoming a “confessed” communist.

In sequence, the book addresses the important “romantic” aspect of Mariáteguiian thought, according to which the thinker sought to dialectically confront original knowledge and the knowledge of modernity, in a search to form a cognitive and practical instrument which he viewed as a foundation for the construction of modern communism. At this point, Gonzalez also mentions the vitalist idea of ““revolutionary myth”: a rational faith in emancipation, the hope

that keeps the resistance of a people (in this case, the Incas) alive in seeking their liberation.

Nevertheless, in approaching this “romantic” face of Mariátegui, it would be up to Gonzalez to also highlight his “realistic” side, attentive to possible practice. If he looked at the rich community traditions of the past and reflected on future perspectives, he nevertheless remained always aware of the need for urgent decisions, subject to imperfections, which is what the narrowness of real alternatives offers us. Mariátegui was not a thinker solely attached to the world of ideas and to rigid principles or dogmas. He intensely valued political practice, almost always restricted to situations far from what his refined theory would want. For example, given the situation of little socialist mobilization in Peru, he chose to call his “communist” party, founded in 1928, the “Peruvian Socialist Party” so as not to further divide his country’s already weak progressive bases. However, from the beginning, he would explain that his organization’s “method of struggle” would be “Marxism-Leninism”, and the “form of struggle”, “revolution” (“Principios programáticos del Partido Socialista”). He also conceived as one of the party’s priorities, the task of linking up to the Third International, an organization from which he would not depart until his death.

It is true that Mariátegui polemicized and debated the stances of the Third International, as is the case with his opposition to the idea of an “autonomous indigenous state” (for him, the problem of the Indian was the problem of the division of land, not of a new nation). But he did not depart from what he considered the great world party. On the contrary, he sought to gradually draw close to the Comintern, even with disagreements, as he understood that this was a delicate moment in the construction of a new

society, and that unity among the communists was needed.

Gonzalez, however, while admitting Mariátegui’s positions and public speeches in favour of the Communist International, tries to interpret them, in a somewhat compelling way, as part of a process of “constraint” or “pressure” that was suffered by the thinker on Moscow’s part.

And here we come to the most problematic point of the book, something that resonates quite out of tune to readers fonder of Mariátegui’s work and the current debates of the dialectical conception of history. Gonzalez stretches his argument too much, running away from historiographical objectivity, and even sinning by a certain anachronism, in wanting to paint the thinker as an alleged irreducible opponent of the Third International. To this end, Gonzalez addresses certain American and *peripheral* issues, as if they were European ones, looking for inconsistent analogies, forcing relationships or assuming positions that were not taken by Mariátegui.

This can be seen especially regarding the internal conflict in the Bolshevik party in the Soviet Union. On this theme, Gonzalez seems to seek to conform Mariátegui’s thinking, in an inaccurate way, to his own anti-Soviet conceptions. He therefore confronts a contradiction, since he wants to transport the Soviet historical debate (between Trotskyism and Stalinism) to a Latin American reality. This is something that – considering not only the words of the Peruvian thinker, but the cognitive content expressed throughout his work – Mariátegui himself would certainly avoid doing. And he did not do so, especially since he did not live during the intensification of this conflict – and here is the *anachronism* mentioned above.

In his context and brief life span (he died in 1930, at the age of 35), Mariátegui

reflected, in various writings, on the Soviet conflict. He criticized positions of the Communist International and showed a certain sympathy for Trotsky, whose opposition was seen as “proof of the vitality of the Bolshevik party,” despite the fact that “he lacked a solid and longstanding link with the Leninist team”. He assessed, with prophetic wit, that the position of the Trotskyist Left Opposition was important “for Soviet politics.” But he also considers that the qualities of this movement, “so far,” do not seem sufficient to “give reason to Trotskyism” in its intention to replace the Soviet government led by Stalin. Stalin was a leader that Mariátegui still viewed as with “greater objective capacity of carrying out the Marxist program”, in that unstable phase of the process.

Certainly, in the light of the knowledge and experiences accumulated in this evolution of less than two centuries of the still young philosophy initiated by Marx and Engels, no modern-day Marxist (especially if not experienced in the high spheres of power, which imply complex decision-making) would sympathize with the authoritarianism that affected certain leaders, in the heated context of conflicts and doubts that involved the construction of the first experiments of real socialism. But if this is the case with Stalin, it is also the case with Trotsky, to a certain degree, keeping in mind the differences of his powers and, therefore, of his possibilities of “authority”, as Lukács notes (“Letter on Stalinism”, 1963).

On the other hand, in the twenty-first century, taking into account the enormous contemporary historiographical knowledge, it is not possible, except with the passion and risk of severe imprecision, to take as correct only one side of the Soviet debate, as Gonzalez does, for whom the Trotskyist stance appears as a synonym for virtue of almost religious purity, while the Stalinist stance is little

more than the irrationality and terror of the most atrocious fascist capitalism. If Trotsky’s critical positions made a fundamental intellectual and political contribution to the dialectical movement of Bolshevik construction, as recognized by Mariátegui, however – in view of a broader perspective, as we have today – we cannot fail to evaluate the errors of Stalinism according to the reality of its historical situation: a new state still fragile and unstable; an ebullient power without a definite historical sense, and seriously besieged by capitalist powers and by violent internal reaction.

In short, Gonzalez, when dealing with this controversial theme, which permeates the entire book, shows too much of himself, of his own intellectual and activist trajectory, deviating at times from his object: the thought and political action of Mariátegui himself.

Finally, despite this preponderance of Trotsky’s thought that can be seen in his Mariátegui, Professor Gonzalez’s praiseworthy initiative is reiterated here, which elaborates with amplitude and didacticism a political and intellectual biography of Amauta in the still hegemonic English language, a work that certainly could vigorously promote the interest in the work of this essential thinker of contemporary Marxism.

The book gains even more relevance, considering that it goes public at a time of the heightening of the capitalist structural crisis (in its labour and environmental aspects). In critical times, such as the ones we are now experiencing, this is a great value to highlight in Gonzalez’s work: relating Mariateguian thinking with several fronts in the contemporary socialist or anti-systemic struggle with resistances that have increasingly questioned the state of metabolism between humans and nature, acknowledging the need for articulation between traditional knowledge (original, among others) and

those of modernity. And these are key processes of the dialectical relations that contribute to conform a *new modernity* (socialist), a stage for the development of

the “new man”, of whom Amauta speaks to us.

YURI MARTINS FONTES
Universidade de São Paulo/
Centre National de la Recherche
Scientifique