

## **Contention in Buenos Aires**

### *The 1929 Communist Debates on Race, Class and the Making of the Present*

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At its Sixth Congress in Moscow in 1928, the Communist International endorsed the principle that black and indigenous peoples in the Americas had the right to territorial self-determination. After significant and heated debates, this idea was then taken up by several Communist parties in the United States and in Latin America. In this paper I track the contention over race, nation, and self-determination that unfolded within Latin America's Communist movement when delegates from the region's parties gathered in Buenos Aires in mid-1929.

The Comintern's self-determination policy emerged through a confluence of Bolshevik thinking about national minorities with rising anticolonial sentiment and a radical black internationalism. Black radicals from the U.S. and Caribbean were critical to the formulation of this policy, playing a key role in Comintern debates. While much has been written on the impact of this policy on the trajectory of U.S. Communism, its consequences for Latin America are much less well known. Yet it was through discussions of race in the U.S. and the colonial world that the Comintern arrived at the idea that indigenous groups and people of African descent in Latin America were "nationalities" rather than racial or ethnic minorities – and that they therefore had the right to self-determination.

In much of the scholarship to date, the self-determination policy has been portrayed as an aberration that Moscow imposed on the region's Communists without regard for local

realities.<sup>1</sup> The archival evidence shows that the self-determination policy took shape through a complex and multi-sided transnational dialogue that involved a range of participants – Bolsheviks, anti-colonial activists, and U.S. and Latin American radicals.

At the Sixth Congress itself, the conceptions of race and nation underpinning the Comintern's thinking were at best hazily defined. In Buenos Aires the following year, those ambiguities were explicitly addressed, leading to lengthy and substantial discussions.<sup>2</sup> Taken together, these constitute some of the Latin American radical left's most substantive reflections on race and nationality, yet their scope and depth has not yet been fully explored or appreciated.<sup>3</sup>

Previous scholarship has tended to focus above all on the contributions made by Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui. Yet this has isolated them from their original context. Resituating Mariátegui's ideas alongside contributions by less well-known figures allows us to see a more dynamic exchange of ideas than has previously been appreciated, including some surprisingly nuanced attempts by Latin American Communists and Comintern envoys to grapple with the "problem of race."

In his Buenos Aires theses, Mariátegui sought to reframe the "problem of race" as fundamentally a material one. "Economically, socially, and politically," he wrote, "the problem of race, like that of the land, is at bottom that of the dissolution of the feudal system." For Mariátegui, focusing on race was ultimately a distraction. Yet while he denied the empirical

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Manuel Caballero, *Latin America and the Comintern* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 57–58; Alberto Flores Galindo, *La agonía de Mariátegui* (Editorial Revolución, 1991), Ch. 1.

<sup>2</sup> A transcript appears in *El Movimiento revolucionario latinoamericano: Versiones de la primera conferencia comunista Latino Americana* (La Correspondencia Sudamericana, 1929), 294–317.

<sup>3</sup> But see Marc Becker, "Mariátegui, the Comintern, and the Indigenous Question in Latin America," *Science and Society*, 70:4 (2006), 450–479; and Ricardo Melgar Bao, "La IC frente al dilema raza y nación en América Latina," *Memoria*, 27 (1989), 337–342.

reality of *race*, Mariátegui acknowledged the ideological and cultural weight of *racism*. The “feudal” and bourgeois classes in Latin American “feel for both the Indians and the blacks and mulattos the same disdain as the white imperialists.”<sup>4</sup>

Surveying the region as a whole, Mariátegui identified three extremely broad racial groups. Just two covered the entire indigenous population: on the one hand “Incan and Aztec Indians” (“*indios incásicos y aztecas*”), and on the other “indigenous people (forest-dwelling)” (“*indígenas [selvícolas]*”). The third racial category was people of African descent. Mariátegui’s treatment of all three was highly schematic. He drew one cardinal contrast between the indigenous and black populations: whereas the former were identified as not only racially but also socio-economically distinct, the latter were subsumed into broader class categories. Indigenous people, in other words, were seen as potential allies of the proletariat, while those of African descent were apparently already within its ranks.

When it came to addressing the “problem of race,” Mariátegui criticized the Comintern’s self-determination policy. Arguing against any “utopian solutions,” he insisted that: “the constitution of the Indian race in an autonomous state would not lead at the present time to the dictatorship of the Indian proletariat... but rather to the constitution of a bourgeois Indian State with all the internal and external contradictions of bourgeois States.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet Mariátegui’s arguments made some significant omissions and errors. For example, he claimed that in Mexico, “there is no hostility towards the Indian,” and that in countries such as Guatemala, “the indigenous problem, in the ‘racial’ sense of the word, does not exist.” He also

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<sup>4</sup> *El Movimiento revolucionario*, 263, 265–266.

<sup>5</sup> *El Movimiento revolucionario*, 288.

asserted that in Latin America, “In general, the black problem does not present a marked racial aspect.”<sup>6</sup> The key point is not the inaccuracy of these views. Rather, it is that his arguments did not address the lived realities of racial discrimination that black and indigenous people endured in common. This was an important weakness, since it enabled those arguing for self-determination to present themselves as being more cognizant of racism and its consequences than their opponents.

The Cuban trade unionist Sandalio Junco spoke at Buenos Aires directly after the Peruvian delegates read Mariátegui’s theses. Like Mariátegui, Junco opposed the idea of a solution to the “black question” in Latin America along the lines the Comintern proposed. But he offered a very different account of the black experience in the Americas. Contrary to what Mariátegui’s theses had argued, Junco insisted that “the black problem exists in every country in Latin America,” adding that “what some comrades have expressed on this question is not the reality.” Junco underscored the interlinked fates of the indigenous and people of African descent – countering the distinctions Mariátegui’s theses had made. Indeed, Junco insisted that “in addressing the problem of the Indians... we are obliged to address simultaneously or in parallel the problem of the blacks.”<sup>7</sup>

The disparity between Junco’s and Mariátegui’s remarks signaled many of the tensions that would plague discussions of race in Latin America for decades to come: the clash over whether the black and indigenous questions should be considered in parallel, and more fundamentally the struggle by Junco and others to get their comrades to acknowledge the existence of racism.

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<sup>6</sup> *El Movimiento revolucionario*, 282–284.

<sup>7</sup> *El Movimiento revolucionario*, 291–292.

There was one further report on race, by Brazilian delegate Leoncio Basbaum, and then a discussion with comments from more than a dozen delegates. These conversations revisited many of the same contested themes. In his closing remarks, the head of the Comintern's Latin America Secretariat, Swiss Communist Jules Humbert-Droz, appeared to congratulate the gathering for being the first to devote an entire session to race. But he observed that comrades from the region had previously denied the problem of race even existed. The discussions in Buenos Aires had clearly demonstrated that it did, and that furthermore it was "of an extreme complexity."<sup>8</sup>

Recognizing the depth of the disagreements, Humbert-Droz did not propose that the Buenos Aires gathering produce a resolution on race. He also conceded that "the slogan of self-determination for oppressed nations... will not be sufficient to solve the racial problem in Latin America."<sup>9</sup> It needed to be supplemented with an agrarian program for the indigenous, but also with demands for mestizos, blacks, whites, Chinese and other immigrant workers. Humbert-Droz was hoping for a grand synthesis, but in Buenos Aires such a synthesis did not have the support of the Latin American delegates. There was therefore some delay before the self-determination policy was adopted by parties in the region: 1931 in Bolivia, 1932 in Cuba and Mexico, 1934 in Chile.

The contention in Buenos Aires has often been framed in terms of Latin American resistance to ideas developed in and for the USSR. Yet this obscures the fact that the debates themselves were relatively open and wide-ranging. Secondly, while the 1929 debates prompted Latin American Communists to devote more attention to race than they had done to date, they also

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<sup>8</sup> *El Movimiento revolucionario*, 310.

<sup>9</sup> *El Movimiento revolucionario*, 312.

exposed a number of blind spots – including an insistence by many Latin American delegates that the “problem of race” did not exist.

The 1929 debates shed new light on the Comintern’s self-determination agenda in Latin America. Far from being an outlandish and ultimately quixotic idea, the policy was a serious attempt to grapple with the problem of racial oppression. And while objections to the self-determination policy from Latin American radicals were substantive and well founded, its supporters could often, and with some justification, paint their opponents as unwilling to recognize the realities of racism and discrimination.