

Indigenous Resistance in the Americas and the Legacy of Mariátegui

ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ

Marc Becker, *Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador's Modern Indigenous Movements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 356 pages, \$22.95, paperback

Following the 2005 election of the first Indigenous president of any country in the Americas—Evo Morales in Bolivia—I commented in MRzine on the fact that many were taken by surprise by this seemingly sudden occurrence out of nowhere, but only because they had not been paying attention to the development of the international Indigenous movement over the past three decades

I called attention to the Indigenous mass movements in the Americas during the 1960s and 1970s that gave rise to the international Indigenous movement that, in turn, brought mass-based Indigenous movements into the United Nations. At that forum, significant work was done to develop international law norms for the protection of Indigenous communities and nations, in order to found collective rights analogous to those established in international law by the process of decolonization, the outstanding achievement of the United Nations. Historian Marc Becker, in his invaluable new book, goes deeper in locating the roots of those twentieth century mass movements, focusing on Ecuador.

Sixteen years before Evo Morales, in another Andean region, Indigenous peoples rose up and paralyzed Ecuador for a week. Becker begins with this moment in a chapter titled, “What Is an Indian?” He describes how the protesters blocked highways, halting all traffic in the country, and then massed in the streets of Quito, the capital, presenting sixteen demands focused on land, culture, and political rights. The pan-Indigenous organization, CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador), founded in 1986, provided both leadership and an ideological frame for the future of Indigenous move-

ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ (www.reddirsite.com), a longtime activist, historian, writer, and professor emeritus at California State University East Bay, has published numerous articles and books on the history and issues of Indigenous peoples, including *The Great Sioux Nation* (1977) and three books of historical memoir.

ments in that country. Becker focuses on the extraordinary role of women's leadership and participation as well ("gendered histories"). Although Becker doesn't refer to it, CONAIE had been actively participating in the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations, and after 1990, the Ecuadorian government included Indigenous representatives in its delegations to the United Nations.

Becker observes that, following the 1990 uprising: "In a manner rarely seen in Latin America, Indigenous activism in Ecuador spawned an academic 'Generation of 1990' with numerous articles, books, and doctoral dissertations on the subject of Indigenous politics. Anthropologists, political scientists, and sociologists analyzed the uprising and the ideological shifts engendered within the Indigenous world. Academics came to see the uprising, the organizational process leading to it, and the political negotiations following it as representing the birth of a new Indigenous ideology and organizational structure."

Becker contrasts that flurry of new academic interest with CONAIE's view of how the resistance movement developed: "Popular, community, syndicate, associate organizations, peasant and Indigenous movements do not appear overnight, nor are they the fruit of one or two people who meet and decide to create them. . . . A movement, a mass organization is the fruit of a long process of organization, of consciousness-raising, of decision making, of uniting many ideas. . . . More than anything, it is the fruit of problems and contradictions that are produced between oppressors and the oppressed at a specific time and place."

Becker agrees, and proceeds to provide a clear, persuasive, and brilliantly written history, based on exhaustive documentation and his direct experience in Ecuador. Noteworthy is the extraordinary collaboration between the Communist Party of Ecuador and Indigenous communities in the highlands, including the early participation of women. Becker's case study of Ecuador suggests that the study of similar collaborations throughout Indigenous regions of the Americas would prove fruitful, not only as a matter of historical research, but also as a guide to political practice.

Thanks to the guiding light of the work and vision of Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui in the 1920s, both communist and Indigenous organizers early on were cognizant that the Indigenous peoples of the Andes are nationalities, which, in the Marxist-Leninist sense, have the right to self-determination, although Mariátegui argued against the practicality of a separate Andean state. Becker wrote

a good book, exploring Mariátegui's influence on Latin American social movements and, more recently, an article specifically addressing the relationship to Indigenous peoples.¹ The book under review focuses on Ecuador, bringing to it not only his knowledge of those questions but also of current Indigenous social movements.

Mariátegui was disabled and in poor health most of his life, dying at age thirty-eight in 1930. Although he was never able even to visit the Andean region and had no Indigenous colleagues, his thorough studies of the "Peruvian reality," that is, its colonial and neocolonial social and economic history, led him to conclude that Indigenous peoples were the source of social revolution in Perú, with land tenure as the key element. He was famous throughout Latin America and in communist and socialist communities as a staunch defender of Indigenous rights, as well as for being a brilliant and devoted socialist. During the time when the Soviet Union-led Comintern promoted the right to self-determination—including independence—of all nationalities, and promoted Black Republics in the United States and in South Africa, it proposed that an Andean Indian Republic be formed in South America.

Mariátegui accepted the fact that Indigenous peoples were nationalities and had the right to self-determination, but believed liberation and socialism—Indigenous socialism—would come from struggles of the Indigenous, peasants, and urban workers in unison. He was certain that a century of independent state formation in Latin America would not lend itself to separatist movements, nor would such movements lead to authentic liberation. In fact, even the most militant Andean leaders and organizations have not proposed separate Indigenous republics, but rather a multinational of state formations. As contemporary Ecuadorian Indigenous (Shuar) intellectual, Ampan Karakras, states: "The power of decision-making and the political will of nationalities will be exercised through the multinational state and its respective agencies and institutions."²

Becker contextualizes the Indigenous-peasant-workers' social movements during the 1920s to the 1950s within the history of anti-colonial Indigenous revolts from the beginning of Spanish occupation of the Andean region and the Ecuadorian Amazon. Here too, he includes the participation and leadership of women. As in the rest of the Americas, Indigenous resistance movements prevented colonialism from achieving total eradication of Indigenous cultures, and actually worked to continue the development of Indigenous identity. However, particularly in

the densely Indigenous-populated areas of Mexico and the Andean states, after independence, the colonial/feudalistic latifundia land tenure system persisted, perpetuating the servile status and debt peonage of agricultural laborers, both Indigenous and Mestizo. Land reform and workers' rights were central to Indigenous struggles, which, in Ecuador at least, brought about alliances between rural Indigenous and Mestizos and urban workers.

Becker shows that socialists not only supported labor and land reform in alliance with Indigenous communities but also Indigenous cultures, languages, and self-governance. They brought to Indigenous struggles tactics such as strikes, demonstrations, and marches, while Indigenous activists adapted socialist tactics to specific, local conditions. Ecuadorian socialists, Becker emphasizes, were not given to paternalism toward the Indians. This work culminated in the 1940s with the founding of the Ecuadorian Federation of Indians (FEI) as part of the communist-led Confederation of Ecuadorian Workers (CTE).

The thesis of communist involvement in social movements is not a popular one. The Cold War affected peoples' movements in every corner of the world, no less the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. By the 1950s, Marxist-inspired movements were under heavy attack, ideologically, as well as physically. As mild a democratic reform government as that in Guatemala was overthrown in 1954 by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, and following the Cuban Revolution, any social movement demanding land reform or workers' rights was labeled communist. Missionary intervention and assistance in Indigenous movements, particularly following Vatican II, largely replaced the weakened socialist movements. One of the most interesting and valuable parts of the book is found in Chapter 7, titled, "Return of the Indian." Here, Becker traces the end of the Indigenous militants of the earlier era, and the rise of new movements, assisted, and sometimes originated, by Christian religious groups, as the "secular leftists and religious activists competed for subaltern allegiance, representing two alternative trends in the evolution of Indigenous movements."

Now that socialism is back in the forefront of the Indigenous movement, most visibly in Bolivia with Evo Morales's political party MAS (Movement Toward Socialism), Becker's book is timely and an important source for those on the left seeking to comprehend Indigenous struggles and aspirations, as well as for Indigenous communities.

Shuar intellectual Ampan Karakras captures the specificity of Indigenous views in contrast to peasants and workers, and especially, unitary nationalism:

The different “indigenous” peoples, from within their cultural beliefs and experience, consider as part of their sovereignty the three areas that modern states consider part of their own sovereignty: the subsoil with all its riches, the soil or the national territory, and the airspace. To the “indigenous” people, in the subsoil are the living or mythological beings that should be respected, and valued, and asked for permission to extract a part of the soil’s riches. In the territory live the human beings; we share the soil with other living creatures—the fauna and the flora—because we are part of nature and not the kings of nature. In the firmament, or the airspace, mythological beings form an indivisible part of the life of human beings and the universe. This “indigenous” concept of sovereignty—that we are an indivisible part of a whole—is entirely different from Western values and concepts of sovereignty. They may be complementary, but they are different in concept and form; for the Western world, everything is money, power, and private property.

We are Nationalities.

Our sovereignty is based on our spiritual relation with Mother Earth, whom we recognize as a point of meeting with the supreme creator and the source of life.³

Readers of *Monthly Review* are well aware that imperialist global capitalism has brought us to the brink of planetary disaster. The notion that Indigenous resistance movements—in particular those imbued with the legacy of the genius of Mariátegui—contain the germ of successful resistance is an idea whose time has come.

1. Marc Becker, “Mariátegui and Latin American Marxist Theory,” Latin American Series, No. 20: Athens, Ohio: *Ohio University Monographs in International Studies* 1993; “Mariátegui, the Comintern, and the Indigenous Question in Latin America,” *Science and Society*, no. 4 (October 2006): 450-479.
2. Ampan Karakras, “Indigenous Sovereignty: An Ecuadorian Perspective,” <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/ourpublications/csqa/article/indigenous-sovereignty-ecuadorian-perspective>.
3. *Ibid.*

Copyright of *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine* is the property of *Monthly Review Foundation* and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.