José Carlos Mariátegui

“The Problem of the Indian”
from
Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality
What is the “Problem of the Indian?”

- It is a **socioeconomic** problem.
- It is tied to the land tenure system of Peru’s economy.
- It can be resolved only through the end of feudalism of the *gamonales* (large landowners).
- It cannot be fixed through Peru’s “administrative, legal or ecclesiastic machinery, its racial dualism or pluralism.”
Gamonalismo

“Writing in the late nineteenth century, Manuel Gonzáles Prada, a limeño resident and an influential iconoclastic writer, used the term *gamonalismo* to identify what he called “the numbing trilogy” (*trinidad embrutecedora*) formed by the priest, the landowner, and the lawyer, which deterred the development of the national state.”

“...Manuel Gonzáles Prada had written, ‘If the *serrano gamonal* serves as the political agent of the Lima señorón (power hungry gentlemen), the Lima señorón defends the *serrano gamonal* when he barbarously abuses the Indian.’”

Gamonalismo

“Gamonalismo, the phenomenon of local political bossism, in the figure of the gamonal. The term is Spanish-American rather than peninsular and probably dates from the early nineteenth century; but even the eminent Colombian philologist Rufino José Cuervo was unable to determine its precise origins. The word gamonal is largely synonymous with the older cacique, an Arawak term adopted by the Spanish in the sixteenth century to denote indigenous chieftains, but which in the republican period came to denote personalist local political power in rural and small-town settings. Gamonal achieved wider currency in Colombia and Peru, while cacique was apparently favored in Mexico; where both are found, gamonal seems to have implied a more self-made, less traditional-bound mode of bossism than did cacique.”

The Indians under the system of Gamonalismo

Festividad religiosa en una hacienda serrana. Los indígenas presididos por sus varayoccs (led by their chiefs) ocupan el patio de la casa-hacienda. El terrateniente (land-holder) y su familia preside la celebración desde los balcones. (Foto Víctor Chambi).

Mariátegui on Gamonalismo

“Gamonalismo necessarily invalidates any law or regulation for the protection of the Indian. The hacienda owner, the latifundista, is a feudal lord. The written law is powerless against his authority, which is supported by custom and habit. Unpaid labor is illegal, yet unpaid and even forced labor survive in the latifundium.” (p.259)
Mariátegui on Gamonalismo

“Which caste, which category of persons, which class, opposes the Indian’s redemption? The answer is only one: gamonalismo, feudalism, and caciquismo. Therefore how can we doubt that a regional administration of caciques and gamonales, the more autonomous it becomes, the more it would sabotage and reject any effective indigenous revindication?”

Why is the Abandonment of the *Gamonalismo* the Only Solution?

- Legal and administrative remedies are futile.
- It isn’t a problem of ethnicity.
- Moral reformation hasn’t proven effective.
- A religious solution is outdated.
- Education alone can’t fix the problem
Legal and Administrative Remedies are Futile:

• “The law cannot prevail against the gamonales. Any official who insisted on applying it would be abandoned and sacrificed by the central government” (p.259) =>
  ▫ Despite legislation geared “to protection the Indian against exaction and abuse,” there remains a great divide between law and actual practice.
• The land has already been seized and legal reform based on the current reality, fails to rectify past injustices.
It Isn’t a Problem of Ethnicity

• “To expect that the Indian will be emancipated through a steady crossing of the aboriginal race with white immigrants is an antisociological naïveté that could only occur to the primitive mentality of an importer of merino sheep” (p.260)
Moral Reformation Hasn’t Proved Effective

- “Humanitarian teachings have not halted or hampered European imperialism, nor have they reformed its methods.” (p.261)
A Religious Solution is Outdated.

“Its representatives...are not concerned with obtaining a new declaration of the rights of Indians, with adequate authority and ordinances; the missionary is merely assigned the role of mediator between the Indian and the gamonal.” (pp.261-2)
Education Alone Can’t Fix the Problem Either.

- “Gamonalismo is fundamentally opposed to the education of the Indian; it has the same interest in keeping the Indian ignorant as it has in encouraging him to depend on alcohol…. School and teacher are doomed to be debased under the pressure of the feudal regime, which cannot be reconciled with the most elementary concept of progress and evolution.” (p.262)
The Solution:

- “As long as the vindication of the Indian is kept on a philosophical and cultural plane, it lacks a concrete historical base. To acquire such a base – that is, to acquire physical reality – it must be converted into an economic and political vindication. Socialism has taught us how to present the problem of the Indian in new terms....we now recognize it concretely as a social, economic and political problem.”
  - Mariátegui’s Prologue to *Tempestad en los Andes* by Valcárcel (see note #3 pp.264-5)
The Solution:

• “Improving the economic condition of the Indian is the best way to raise his social condition. His economic strength and all his activity are found in the land. To take him away from the land is to alter profoundly and dangerously the ancestral tendency of his race. In no other place and in no other way can he find a better source of wealth than in the land.”

  • José Antonio Encinas, Contribución a una legislación tutelar indígena, 1918 (see note#1 pp.262-3)
A Contemporary Spanish Precedent: Marinaleda

"When the 1,200-hectare El Humoso farm was finally won in 1991 – awarded to the village by the regional government following a decade of relentless occupations, strikes and appeals – cultivation began. The new Marinaleda co-operative selected crops that would need the greatest amount of human labour, to create as much work as possible. In addition to the ubiquitous olives and the oil-processing factory, they planted peppers of various kinds, artichokes, fava beans, green beans, broccoli: crops that could be processed, canned, and jarred, to justify the creation of a processing factory that provided a secondary industry back in the village, and thus more employment. "Our aim was not to create profit, but jobs," Sánchez Gordillo explained to me."

A Contemporary Spanish Precedent: Marinaleda

- “The town co-operative does not distribute profits: any surplus is reinvested to create more jobs. Everyone in the co-op earns the same salary, €47 (£40) a day for six and a half hours of work: it may not sound like a lot, but it’s more than double the Spanish minimum wage. Participation in decisions about what crops to farm, and when, is encouraged, and often forms the focus of the village’s general assemblies – in this respect, being a cooperativista means being an important part of the functioning of the pueblo as a whole. Where once the day labourers of Andalusia were politically and socially marginalised by their lack of an economic stake in their pueblo, they are now – at least in Marinaleda – called upon to lead the way.”

  (ibid.)

Juan Manuel Sánchez Gordillo, mayor of Marinaleda, attending a protest in Seville. Photograph: Dave Stelfox
A Contemporary Spanish Precedent: Marinaleda

“Non-co-operativists are by no means excluded from involvement in the town's political, social and cultural life. Private enterprise is permitted in the village – perhaps more importantly, it is still an accepted part of life. As with the seven privately owned bars and cafés in the village (the Sindicato bar is owned by the union), if you wanted to open a pizzeria or a little family business of any kind, no one would stand in your way. But if a hypothetical head of regional development and franchising for, say, Carrefour, or Starbucks, with a vicious sense of humour and a masochistic streak, decided this small village was the perfect spot to expand operations, well – they wouldn't get very far. "We just wouldn't allow it," Sánchez Gordillo told me bluntly.”

* (ibid.)

Workers in the Olive groves of El Humoso, Marinaleda. Photograph: Dave Stelfox for the Observer
Dave Stelfox/Observer