Introduction

New Views on the History of Latin American Communism

by
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Communists and Marxists in general tend to emphasize historical processes when they analyze social phenomena. Yet, when Marxist intellectuals approach the study of the history of the communist movement there is a marked tendency for them to ignore Marxist categories and abandon a critical attitude toward the subject of their reflections. When writing their own history, these scholars fall back on a messianic and utopian communist tradition that ends up taking precedence over the critical tradition inherent in Marxism. This messianic narrative, as well as an understandable human difficulty in reflecting on oneself with the same rigor as is applied to other political and social phenomena, has created extremely idealistic historical communist narratives in which the "correct" line or the "ideological level" of a communist party or of one of its leaders determines political success or failure in advancing or delaying a socialist future. Marxist categories often deteriorate into vulgarized epithets (with the term "petty-bourgeois" being the favorite means of discounting or criticizing any opposing person or idea within the communist movement) identifying ideological "deviations" without any analysis of the way these class origins and structures actually operated. In many cases the history of communist parties and revolutionary movements has been told by focusing primarily on the actions, successes, and failures of the leaderships' political lines and their ideological elaboration.

This historiographic tradition, with roots in Bolshevik polemics, has pervaded communist histories for decades. In capitalist countries—both on the periphery and in the metropolis—Marxist intellectuals of various communist currents became professional historians as political and ideological crises diverted them from a life of revolutionary militancy toward distanced reflection from within the academic world. Considering the tremendous number of professional historians who developed intellectually within the framework of communist parties or Marxist revolutionary movements, it is surprising that the twentieth century produced so few critical historical works on communism. This is particularly noteworthy given the importance of this subject and the rich and sophisticated historical tools that these intellectuals developed in analyzing other political and social phenomena.

The historiography on communists in capitalist countries has been overwhelmingly shaped by cold-war dichotomies. Inspired either by an a priori

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anticommunism that sought to know the enemy or by a tendency of communists to use their historical narratives as a form of indoctrination and propaganda, the historical production of this era has left us with few interesting works, although these few do provide us with valuable information. Robert J. Alexander's (1957) work on Latin American labor movements and communist parties, based on thousands of interviews with people of all political persuasions, represented the classic anticommunist take on the revolutionary left in Latin America. A notable exception to the genre was the original work of Francis X. Sutton (1990), who at the height of the cold war wrote a thesis at Harvard from the perspective of "knowing the enemy" that was revised and published after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Despite premises and conceptualizations profoundly rooted in an assessment of capitalism as the normative order, Sutton managed to analyze important aspects of communists' rationales and practices in the Western world. Given the polarizing framework of the cold war, "critical" and "heterodox" Marxist historians not surprisingly chose to devote their studies to other topics so that their work would not be used in the propaganda wars between the two blocs or among the various currents and sects of the revolutionary left.

In the 1970s and 1980s scholars began to publish valuable historical works on the communist parties that offered interesting analyses and dealt with questions that transcended ideological propaganda and analysis of their or their adversaries' successes and errors. It is no surprise that many of these works were written by ex-communists who on leaving the party in the 1960s and 1970s did not have to renounce Marxist approaches or embrace hegemonic Western discourses and succeeded in maintaining a critical distance from both existing political systems. Perhaps the first of these works that should be consulted is Fernando Claudín's (1970) *La crisis del movimiento comunista.* Its wealth of information and the clarity of its arguments outweigh the limitations due to its polemical tone and the author's need to settle accounts with his own past as a Spanish communist. Freeing themselves from the East-West dichotomy and concerning themselves with applying Marxism to the study of the revolutionary left, Western European scholars have produced an array of interesting historical and sociological studies, mainly of the Italian, Spanish, French, and British communist parties. During this same period, with regard to Latin America, Ronald Chilcote's (1974) work on the history of the Brazilian Communist party stands out as an ambitious and pioneering study with a serious and solid Marxist interpretation not tied to the immediate interests of an official party narrative.

During those tumultuous and trying years in Latin America, the political urgencies of the period were not conducive to the production of works of criticism, which require a certain distancing from the subject under consideration. José Aricó, the Argentine Marxist intellectual, was one of the most prominent historians working in the late 1970s and early 1980s in promoting a critical and reflexive consideration of Latin American Marxism (Aricó, 1978; 1980; 1999). It is no accident that he produced his work while in exile in Mexico, where he was distanced from the day-to-day political urgencies and could write from a continental perspective that would have been difficult to reproduce in Argentina. Exile, in his case in France, was also the setting for the development

of Michael Löwy's (1973; 1981) original and heterodox research on Marxist Latin American thought.

It is impossible to mention all of the innovative works produced in the 1980s about Latin American Marxism. The Peruvian historian Alberto Flores Galindo (1980; 1982) is notable for his capacity to develop a critical historical perspective of Peruvian communism even though he was deeply involved in the political battles within the country's left. Manuel Caballero (1987) wrote a history of the Comintern in Latin America, relying on documents from Europe, Latin America, and the United States. Without access to the archives in Moscow, his work offered a concise history of the Third (Communist) International that focused on its theory and practice. In the midst of the crisis of paradigms that preceded the collapse of "real" socialism, Latin American Marxist narratives attempted to avoid Eurocentrism through renewed interest in the works of Mariátegui and other heterodox Marxist writers. However, these works, which reconsidered and developed in a more profound and systematic way questions that had already been posed by Latin American Marxist thinkers in previous decades, did not include serious histories of the communist parties. The heterodox Marxists of the 1980s were much more interested in the history of ideas and the antecedents of heterodoxy than in the ideologically boring communist parties. In addition, the Latin American essayist tradition and the lack of research funds in Latin American institutions also limited their ability to conduct extensive archival investigations and thoroughly develop this topic.

In the past 10 years there has been a considerable increase in research on communism in the twentieth century, including important studies of Latin America. The end of an era that came with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disarticulation of what had been an international communist movement permitted the elaboration of analyses free from the dichotomies and implications that were implicit in works produced on the ideological and propaganda battlefield of the cold war. Under these new circumstances scholars have been able to take the risk of developing new interpretations and speculations with fewer inhibitions and external constraints. This privileged viewpoint permits more mature reflection that greatly alters the questions that historians are asking, turning some topics into obsolete and insignificant polemics, giving others new meaning, and occasionally reemphasizing the importance of subjects that had not previously been identified as worthy of interest or analysis. Cultural analyses, for example, will certainly become an important theme in the history of communism, offering new insights and perspectives.

Moreover, the end of an epoch has meant that more collections of documents are available, especially materials in Soviet and U.S. archives. The democratic processes in Latin America that took place after the demise of dictatorships throughout the continent have provided new access to police, intelligence, personal, union, party, and other archives. These new venues of investigation serve as valuable sources for scholars working on histories of the communist movement in Latin America. At the same time, veteran militants, who in many cases have experienced a profound personal reconsideration of the history in which they were protagonists, have written memoirs or have been more willing to grant interviews in which they share their ideas and feelings about these experiences. Certainly they do so much more openly and with much less

consideration about how their versions of the past might affect present-day militancy than they would have a decade or two ago.

In recent years scholars have published many new works about Latin American communists. Some of them have relied on access to new sources through the opening up of the Comintern archives (e.g., Jeifets, Jeifets, and Huber, 2004; Ulianova and Riquelme, 2005). Others have used new information to develop new interpretations of the history of communism within a given national framework or the history of the organizations, institutions, and international aspects of the communist movement (e.g., Santana, 2001; Camarero, 2007). International conferences have produced important new works (Concheiro, Modonessi, and Crespo, 2007). This issue draws heavily on the new scholarship encouraged by the symposium organized by Olga Ulianova at the 2003 International Congress of Americanists in Santiago, Chile.

In the first article, Ricardo Melgar Bao critically addresses the subject of the Anti-Imperialist League of the America, using the concept of Orientalism to analyze attitudes toward Latin America within the Comintern. Using new sources, he meticulously examines the subtleties of the different positions within the international communist movement and offers an extremely original conceptual analysis of the way Marxist anti-imperialism was shaped in Latin America.

Isidro Vanegas examines early forms of socialism in Colombia in an international framework. Carefully following and documenting the ideas and the development of socialist organizations in Colombia from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, he offers a complex interpretation of the relationship among ideas, symbols, and international relations, on one hand, and their impact within Colombia as they were incorporated into country's preexisting political culture, on the other.

To a certain extent Klaus Meschkat continues Vanegas's theme, focusing much less on ideas and perceptions than on the constant and explicit attempts by the Comintern and its first Colombian adherents to carry out the revolutionary struggle in that country. Drawing on new sources from the Moscow archives, Meschkat describes and analyzes the political effort to establish a Colombian revolutionary vanguard under the direction of the Comintern, revealing the inefficient and clumsy actions of the international communist structures designed for Latin America in that period and the heterodoxy of the early Colombian communists, who were responding to a reality that did not correspond to the analytical categories and the premises of the International.

Daniela Spenser convincingly presents an argument that explains the notable limitations of the communist impact in Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s. Even though it represented a radical oppositional tradition, the Mexican Communist party worked within the Mexican national revolutionary process and guided the left's revolutionary potential in the context of the conflicts and social contradictions of the period, consequently limiting the development of a local pro-Soviet communism.

Michael Löwy continues to offer a heterodox and antipositivist interpretation of Latin American Marxism, here examining the relationship between communism and religion in the revolutionary mysticism of José Carlos Mariátegui, the founder of Peruvian Marxism.

Valério Arcary offers a political analysis of the Brazilian Workers' party in the framework of early-twentieth-century socialist and communist ideologies. Although his article does not directly address the history of the Latin American communist parties, his provocative Marxist criticism of the course of the government led by Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva confirms the fact that revolutionary polemics remain alive in contemporary debates about the future of socialism in Latin America.

Continuing interest in the revolutionary Che Guevara is reflected in the unconventional and fresh analysis provided by David Kunzle, which is facilitated by the inclusion of images. For those who saw his 1997 exhibit at UCLA's Fowler Museum or are familiar with the cadences of the Cuban *son* he cites, this article will be a welcome expansion on a theme that he has been developing for some time. In a time when revolutionary ideology in the Americas is said to be less orthodox and even heterodox, the persistence of Che Guevara's Warholian portrait is fascinating. Even in the United States, it appears across the arts spectrum from the final scene in the Oscar-winning film of Che's early years, *Motorcycle Diaries*, to the ubiquitous T-shirts in urban U.S. Latino neighborhoods.

We hope that this issue of *Latin American Perspectives* will contribute to the study of a central historical theme that deserves much more discussion and analysis. Both historians working on Latin America and those committed to the liberation and social transformation of the continent should find the analyses presented here an important source of reflection.

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