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21. Ibid., 147.
22. Ibid., 150.
23. Ibid., 145.
24. Thanks to Lori Gallegos de Castillo for this example.
25. Ibid., 188.
26. Ibid., 145.
27. Ibid., 190ff.
28. Ibid., 127.
29. Ibid., 180.
30. "In vain do I fulfill the functions of a café waiter . . . . What I attempt to realize is a being-in-itself of the café waiter, as if it were not just in my power to confer their value and their urgency upon my duties and the rights of my position, as if it were not my free choice to get up each morning at five o'clock or to remain in bed, even though it meant getting fired . . ." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 101f.
31. Sánchez, *Suspension of Seriousness,* 141f.
32. Ibid., 194.
33. Ibid., 196.
34. Ibid., 197.
35. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1949), 45ff. There are quite a few parallels between this text and Portilla's *Phenomenology.* De Beauvoir analyzes several characters who reveal possible positions one can take on his freedom and responsibility, including the "sub-man," the "serious man," the "nihilist," the "adventurer," and so on. Portilla's text fits nicely in this vein, adding a character distinctive of Latin America, the *relajiento*. Portilla's description of the *apretado* is also much more loaded with overtones of class and racial oppression than de Beauvoir's description of the "serious man."
36. Sánchez, *Suspension of Seriousness,* 196.
37. Ibid., 178.
38. Ibid., 180.
39. Ibid., 179.
40. David Foster Wallace, "*E Unibus Pluram*: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 151–94.
41. Sánchez considers the possibility that in the contemporary era, "*relajo,* understood as a suspension of serious commitment to value and duty, *is the rule*, not the exception." Sánchez, *Suspension of Seriousness*, 118.
42. Ibid., 193.
43. Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.)
44. Sánchez, *Suspension of Seriousness,* 171f.
45. Lear, *A Case for Irony,* 12.
46. Ibid., 76.
47. Jose Martí, "Our America," in *Latin American Philosphy: An Introduction with Readings*, ed. Susana Nuccitelli and Gary Seay (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 232f.
48. Thanks to Robert Sánchez for helping me appreciate this point.
49. I find the discussion of *machismo* to be particularly relevant here because I suspect that the *relajiento* may be motivated, ultimately, by frustration and wounded pride. Excluded and alienated from the cultural practices that dominate his society and render him impotent to address the injustices that he sees all around him, the *relajiento* pronounces these practices "sour grapes" and acts as though he never even wanted to participate anyway. If this analysis is accurate, then although he may act as tranquil as an ancient Stoic, the *relajiento* would remain deeply conflicted and liable to act out in destructive ways. A more humane understanding of masculinity, on the other hand, might ease the conflict of the *relajiento*—and change the world for the better.
50. Sánchez, *Suspension of Seriousness,* 174.
51. Ibid., 176.

Mariátegui's Myth

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José Carlos Mariátegui is among the best known Marxist philosophers of Latin America. Arguing on behalf of Indigenous rights and influencing the likes of Ernesto Che Guevara, Mariátegui is not only respected by Latin Americans as a philosopher but also admired for his uncompromising courage. This article aims to provide readers with the historical and intellectual context from which Mariátegui developed his thoughts regarding a revolutionary myth. To this end, we begin with Mariátegui's historical context; we then consider the influence that Manuel González Prada, Georges Sorel, and Antonio Gramsci had on Mariátegui's thought. We also examine Mariátegui's suggestions and his assessment of the Peruvian situation.[1]

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mariátegui formulated his ideas regarding a revolutionary myth between 1920 and 1930, about a century after Perú became independent from Spain in 1824. These hundred or so years allowed Mariátegui the historical perspective to see the various stages that Perú had undergone, and where his country was at that time. He was well aware of Peruvian history, the slavery of the Indigenous people during the Spanish colonization, and the promises of freedom for all peoples that were made during the war of independence.

During the nearly four centuries that Perú was a Spanish colony, Spain was primarily interested in mining silver and gold from Perú. Aside from institutionalized slavery, the colonizers were not interested in developing other internal structures, and the interests of the Indigenous people were simply not a factor when the Peruvian war of independence took place. Mariátegui explains that there were two main reasons for this war.[2] First, the French Revolution and the U.S. Constitution evoked a sense of freedom in the Latin American bourgeoisie, and these events caused them to want their independence from Spain. The second reason for the war of independence was the economic interests of the Latin American bourgeoisie who wished to engage England, Europe, and North America. As long as the Latin American bourgeoisie were subject to Spanish rule, they were not free to engage other countries economically. Thus, the Peruvian war of independence was fought to gain freedom for the Peruvian people; however, Indigenous people did not figure into its goals. It was ultimately the economic interests of the creole class that propelled the various wars of independence in the Americas.

Once Perú became independent from Spain, the local bourgeoisie entered into trade agreements with England and other European countries as well as North America. These economic agreements enabled Perú to borrow money from England in exchange for *guano*. England and the United States invested in the development of railways in Perú, in machinery to further mine gold and silver, and in the industrialization of the cities on the coast.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mariátegui observed three types of economies in Perú: communism,

feudalism, and capitalism. In the Peruvian context, communism was the economic system that characterized the Indigenous communities where there was no private property to exploit or invest. Indigenous communism was based on the reciprocity of services. A feudal system existed alongside the Indigenous communism. When Perú became independent from Spain, the land that had been previously assigned to the Peruvian *criollos* in the form of *encomiendas* became the property of the Peruvian bourgeoisie who took control over the land along with the Indigenous people who lived there. Mariátegui writes that, during the time of the new republic, "the elements and characteristics of a feudal society were mixed with the elements of a slave-holding society."[3] The Peruvian bourgeoisie obtained their freedom from Spain and now had absolute power to continue exploiting the Indigenous population. Instead of gaining their freedom, conditions for the Indigenous people during the new republic worsened.

The Spanish viceroyalty was actually less harsh on Indigenous people than the republic. True, the Spanish viceroyalty was responsible for the enslavement of the Indians. However, during the Spanish inquisition, Bartolome de las Casas intensely defended the Indians against the brutal methods of the colonizers; there was no such figure to argue on behalf of Indigenous people during the time of the republic. The Spanish viceroyalty was a medieval and foreign regime while the republic was a Peruvian and liberal institution. In this sense, the republic had economic and political obligations towards Indigenous people that the Spanish viceroyalty did not have. Contrary to this duty, the republic further impoverished Indigenous people, aggravated their depression and intensified their misery.[4]

During the republic, the feudal lord had absolute power over the land and the people who lived there. Mariátegui explains how the peasants contributed the seeds, their labor, and the materials necessary for farming. After the harvest, the peasants and the feudal lord divided the products, "and this, with the feudal lord having done nothing more than to allow the use of his land without even fertilizing it."[5] Besides working for a feudal lord, Indigenous people also worked in the mines.

> The mining industry is almost entirely in the hands of two major U.S. companies. Wages are paid in the mines, but the pay is negligible, the defense of the worker's life is almost zero, the workers' compensation law is circumvented. The system of *enganche* falsely enslaves the workers and places the Indians at the mercy of these capitalist enterprises. The feudal land condemns the Indians to so much misery that the Indians prefer the fate the mines have to offer.[6]

Needless to say, Mariátegui was deeply affected by his historical circumstance. This resulted in his exile from Perú in 1920 due to his criticism of Augusto B. Leguía's government (1908–1912, 1919–1930). In Europe, Mariátegui became acquainted with the thought of Georges Sorel and Antonio Gramsci, both of whom influenced Mariátegui decisively. When Mariátegui returned from Europe in 1923 he wrote his *Siete ensayos de Interpretación de la Realidad Peruana,* his most incisive critique of the Peruvian situation. The following section provides the intellectual context from which Mariátegui developed his revolutionary myth.

GONZÁLEZ PRADA, GRAMSCI, AND SOREL

Mariátegui was influenced by several of Manuel González Prada's (1848–1918) ideas. Among these are the distinction that González Prada makes between the Indigenous reality *vis-á-vis* the other social classes of Perú and what González Prada's calls, "indigenism."

González Prada aimed to promote Peruvian nationalism with his "Discurso en el Politeama" (1888). Here, he exposed the schism of the Peruvian republic among the creole, mestizo, and Indigenous people. The collective consciousness of the Peruvian bourgeoisie acknowledged the existence of Indigenous people *as people* only after Perú was defeated by Chile in the Pacific War (1879–1883). Peruvians expected to win the war against Chile because Perú had been the center of the Spanish viceroyalty and Peruvians believed themselves to be more powerful than Chile; nevertheless, Perú lost this war.

González Prada was critical of his own social class and suggested that lack of nationalism was the likely cause for their defeat. Mariátegui wrote that González Prada embodied "the first moment of lucid consciousness of Perú."[7] González Prada represented the moment when the Peruvian bourgeoisie realized for the very first time that Indigenous people were part of Perú. González Prada writes, "If we made a serf out of the Indian, then what country is he supposed to defend? Just like the medieval serf, the Indian will only defend the interests of his feudal lord."[8]

In his 1904 essay "Nuestros Indios," González Prada associates Peruvian nationalism with indigenism. He points out the feudal conditions that existed in Perú at the time:

> It is nowhere written but everywhere observed that when it comes to the Indian he has no rights but obligations. When it comes to him, a personal complaint is taken as a sign of insubordination, as a collective outbreak of revolt. The Spanish royalists killed him when he tried to shake off the yoke of his conquerors. We the Republicans will exterminate him when he grieves of his onerous work. Our form of government is essentially a big lie because a state where two or three million people live set apart from the law does not deserve to be called a democratic republic.[9]

González Prada speculated that given the circumstances, "either the ruling class ceded some of its power to Indigenous people, or Indigenous people would muster the courage to punish their oppressors."[10] Mariátegui agreed, "the main question regarding the Indian, more than pedagogical, is economic, it is social."[11] For Mariátegui, the Indigenous condition would only be ameliorated by the return of land and the empowerment of people.[12]

Like Antonio Gramsci, Mariátegui was also interested in studying cultural issues. Gramsci believed that the seizing of political power by the proletariat would not be sufficient to manifest a revolutionary movement. Besides the seizing of political power, a counterhegemonic structure must be

developed in order to replace the existing structure. Gramsci believed that the role of the socialist party was to motivate awareness so that politically passive subjects would become politically active agents.[13]

Given Gramsci's influence upon Mariátegui's thought, Mariátegui argued that a change in the economic structure would not be sufficient to change the sociopolitical conditions of the Indigenous people in Perú. In his essay "El Proceso de la Instrucción Pública," Mariátegui cites the declaration made by the Argentine newspaper *La Vanguardia* in 1925. There are two important ideas to note here. The first idea is what Mariátegui thought about education, and the second, Gramsci's influence on Mariátegui regarding hegemony.

> The educational problem is but one phase of the social problem, hence it cannot be solved in isolation. The culture of any society is the ideological expression of the interests of the ruling class. The culture of our current society is therefore the ideological expression of the capitalist class interests.[14]

Given that the problem was the hegemony of the capitalist class, and the oppression was not merely economic, but also cultural, aesthetic, and educational, Mariátegui believed that besides changing the economic structure, it was also necessary that the proletariat and Indigenous people be made aware of their sociopolitical situation.

In addition to Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony, Mariátegui also believed it would be best to stop thinking of the socialist revolution as being historically determined. Rather than expecting the revolution to take place on its own, the socialist revolution requires a deliberate activism to bring about the revolution. This is crucial because Mariátegui goes on to combine Gramsci's idea of deliberate activism with Georges Sorel's notion of myth to arrive at his own conclusions.

In *Reflections on Violence* (1906), Georges Sorel argues for the rejection of reform movements. Instead, he recommends a revolutionary myth that would bring about a general strike, which would in turn encourage and mobilize the proletariat class to enter the class war and undermine capitalism.[15] Unlike Gramsci, Sorel was not interested in building a coherent and consistent ideological structure that would ensure that desired change would endure. According to Sorel, what was important was the political mobilization of the working class.[16] Sorel admired the passionate blind faith that characterizes some religious followers, and he advocated for the proletariat to develop a similar kind of faith that the socialist revolution is not only possible but also desirable, imminent, and necessary. Sorel writes:

> Those who live in the world of myths are free from any kind of refutation and cannot be discouraged. It is therefore through myths that we should understand the activity, feelings and ideas of the public as they prepare to enter a decisive fight.[17]

For Sorel, it was of utmost importance for the proletariat to develop absolute trust in the success of the revolution; even if this meant the revolutionary leaders had to deceive the proletariat, "even assuming that revolutionaries must be entirely deceived in the project to begin with the general strike."[18] Like Sorel, Mariátegui also believed it would be necessary for the proletariat to be spiritually prepared in order to bring about a successful revolution.

MARIÁTEGUI'S ASSESSMENT OF THE PERUVIAN SITUATION

In 1924, the Communist International believed the best way to establish socialism in Latin America would be to classify the continent by language and race.[19] Although Mariátegui wished for Perú to stop being a neo-colony of Western imperialism and also believed the best way to achieve this goal would be through socialism, Mariátegui disagreed with the International's approach. He was convinced the Indigenous problem was not one of language or race, but rather the feudal condition of land distribution. He wished to see Perú end its economic dependence on foreign capital as well as the integration of Indigenous people into the Peruvian national culture.

Mariátegui argued that the best alternative to feudalism in Perú would be the native Peruvian community structure of the *ayllu*. An ayllu is an Indigenous community where private property does not exist; thus, members of the ayllu cannot invest in, nor exploit property for economic gain. The ayllu's economy is characterized by the reciprocity of services the members provide for each other. Mariátegui believed the ayllu would solve Perú's feudalism problem because the ayllu was a native communal structure.[20] However, in 1929, during the First Communist Latin American Conference that took place in Buenos Aires, the International decided to censor Mariátegui's ideas for being unorthodox.[21]

Just the year before the International censored Mariátegui, he disagreed publicly with Victor Raul Haya de la Torre, the founder and leader of APRA (Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana). Mariátegui struck out on his own and established the Socialist party of Perú. This is important because, having been influenced by Sorel, Mariátegui did not believe that a democratic consensus was necessary to establish a socialist system in Perú. Instead, like Sorel, Mariátegui focused on how to bring about a revolution and advocated a revolutionary vanguard consisting of the proletariat and Indigenous people.[22]

Mariátegui also refused to consider education as a means of improving the sociopolitical and economic situation of Indigenous people because the type of education they received at that time was only a means of perpetuating the status quo. For Mariátegui, the right of Indigenous people to own their own land was more fundamental than their right to an education. As long as Indigenous people continued living in a feudal system, their education would only serve to maintain the hegemony of the bourgeoisie. According to Mariátegui's Gramscian interpretation, education was simply indoctrination to the belief that Indigenous people were naturally inferior to the bourgeoisie. Education only served to further bind Indigenous people to the subservient place they had been assigned in the feudal system.

> The Indigenous problem of illiteracy is in reality a much larger problem that goes beyond being a

> simple pedagogical issue. Everyday we can see how instruction is not the same as education. The elementary schooling the Indian receives does not uplift him morally or socially. The first concrete step towards a redemptive improvement must be abolishing their subservience.[23]

Given this type of education, Mariátegui was doubtful that Indigenous people would acquire the necessary skills to govern themselves, and no democratic or liberal institution would be able to thrive as long as Perú remained a feudal state.

Moreover, communist movements have been generally characterized by their rejection of religious beliefs. Mariátegui did not agree with this communist approach either. A biographical anecdote about Mariátegui relates how his mother, Maria Amalia La Chira, had lost her first three children shortly after giving birth to them, and she had found refuge from her suffering in the Catholic religion. Her commitment to religious faith was so strong that in order to protect her children, she left her husband Francisco Javier Mariátegui when she learned that he was the son of an atheist. Maria Amalia shared her deep religious commitment with her children, and although Mariátegui was critical of the catastrophic consequences of the Spanish colonization and genocide, still Mariátegui writes: "As far as religion is concerned, the Spanish colonization did not commit any excesses."[24] Mariátegui believed that religion is an essential part of being human, and it was not necessary to reject religion to bring about social change.

Mariátegui suggested we expand our definition of religion because, he argued, a revolution is a type of religious endeavor, and communism is essentially religious.[25] He believed human beings are spiritual beings who are compelled into action by the spiritual and ethical dimensions of myths. He writes: "Secular morality . . . does not satisfy the need for absolutes that exists as the basis of every human question."[26] He believed that without a myth or ideals for us to believe in, and strive towards, human existence would have no historical significance.

A MYTH AS SOLUTION

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries philosophers were increasingly captivated by positivism in science and philosophy. Positivism became such a strong philosophical current that it affected the policies of several Latin American countries. Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship in México (1876–1911), for instance, was justified by *los cientificos*.[27] For example, the justification as to why the class in power should remain in power was an argument along these lines: "Who should we trust to make important decisions, such as how to govern? Should the average uneducated person, or those who have experience with these issues, decide? It makes sense for those with the most relevant experience to make the decisions." In this way, power remained in the hands of the upper educated class, while the lower classes had no choice but to bend to the decisions of the scientists.

But not all philosophers of this time were captivated by positivism. Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, pointed out that positivism oftentimes led to nihilism.[28] Mariátegui was not impressed by positivism either, and instead saw religion as a solution to the nihilist attitudes of this time. He believed it would be preferable for the upper classes to be left with the nihilist consequences of their positivism, while the proletariat class developed their faith in a revolutionary myth. Mariátegui agreed that the power of revolutionaries did not come from their ability to manipulate science. The power of revolutionaries came from their faith, passion, and determination. For Mariátegui, revolutionary leaders were an embodiment of religious, mystical, and spiritual forces.

Like Gramsci, Mariátegui believed the working class should be agents of change, not merely peaceful spectators; and like Sorel, Mariátegui broke with the determinism of historical materialism to restore the power of myth to the socialist cause. In his 1925 essay "El Hombre y el Mito," Mariátegui suggests that philosophers ought to stop rationalizing with common people because they are "simple people who are not able to understand subtleties."[29] Mariátegui believed human beings are fundamentally metaphysical creatures who need myths or stories to give meaning to their lives, and neither philosophy nor the materialism of science fulfills a person's profound sense of being. Scientific skepticism, though rational, is not fulfilling, and philosophy only provides relative truths. Reason tells us that it is useless to believe in absolute truths, while science tells us that the truths we believe in today will be rejected tomorrow.

Mariátegui did not believe the average person would or could understand the relativist language of philosophers and scientists. He argued it would be best to encourage belief in a revolutionary myth because, according to Mariátegui, people only act decisively when they believe in a cause in an absolute way. The bourgeoisie with their science and philosophy had been left without absolute truths, and Mariátegui believed it would be easy to displace them from power if Indigenous people and the proletariat fought together with a common conviction.

Ultimately, Mariátegui argued for a broader definition of religion because, for him, communism is essentially religious.

> Today we know . . . that a revolution is always religious. The word "religion" has a new value, a new meaning. It connotes more than rituals or churches. Never mind that the Soviets write in their propaganda "religion is the opium of the people." Communism is essentially religious.[30]

Mariátegui recognized the similarities between religious and communist doctrines. Both provide absolute answers and the promise of a better life to come. Hence, Mariátegui argued, the absolute answers provided by belief in a communist revolutionary myth are more conducive to the change he wished to see than a relativist dialogue.

CONCLUSION

It is necessary to emphasize that Mariátegui had the best interests of the Indigenous people in mind. He was passionate about this issue and worked relentlessly to secure the rights of Indigenous people; and when one considers Mariátegui's life as a whole, it is easy to be inspired by his work ethic despite the numerous health problems from which he suffered.[31] Nevertheless, Mariátegui is ultimately inconsistent in the way he relates to Indigenous people. On

one hand, he believes Indigenous people are human beings, deserving of recognition as rational autonomous agents. On the other hand, Mariátegui also believes that Indigenous people are not sophisticated enough to understand scientific and philosophical subtleties. Mariátegui was ultimately not confident in the ability of Indigenous people to establish institutions that would promote the development of their society.

In effect, Mariátegui's well-meaning conclusion suffers from the internalized paternalism of a colonized consciousness. Mariátegui believed that since Indigenous people were not able to think rationally through their oppression, it would be best if those who could think rationally made decisions on behalf of those who did not so long as these were in the best interests of the latter. And the most urgent decision to be made was to change the direction and thus the command of the state's institutions through a revolution. After gaining political power through the revolutionary process, Mariátegui believed the Indigenous people would then be recognized as equal and autonomous members of the Peruvian society.

Of course, there are problems with Mariátegui's approach. One such problem is that suggesting that people adopt ideologies—for instance, faith in a revolutionary myth—has led more than one Latin American country into the hands of populist demagogues.[32] Another problem is that the social change that takes place is not authentic and consequently not long-lasting. This is because the individual person is not autonomously engaged in the process of change. The "social change" is only a change of who is in power and the system remains paternalistic, authoritarian, and unstable because the minds and hearts of people continue to be subject to manipulation.

Given our place in history, it would be easy to judge Mariátegui's approach as ultimately misguided. But we must acknowledge his historical context and understand that unlike our own situation in this time and age, he had no knowledge of the differing models of democracy currently prevalent and thus could not mine these models for ideas and guidelines as to how a society may bring about the changes he wished to see. When Mariátegui wrote his *Siete Ensayos*, slavery had been abolished, but Perú was still a feudal state. The predominant consciousness of the time, which affected Mariátegui himself, was to think of Indigenous people as morally immature, and generally underdeveloped people. Mariátegui was genuinely not aware that freedom is not something that can be imposed upon others, or even gifted, but rather something that must be cultivated in an authentic manner by each one of us.

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NOTES

1. All translations from Spanish into English are mine.
2. José Carlos Mariátegui, *Siete Ensayos de Interpretación de la Realidad Peruana* (Perú: Biblioteca Amauta, 1981), 15.
3. Ibid., 15.
4. Ibid., 46.
5. Ibid., 96.
6. *Enganche* means indenture. Ibid., 48.
7. Ibid., 255.
8. Manuel, González Prada, *Ensayos Escogidos* (Lima: Editora Latinoamericana SA, 1958), 21.
9. Ibid., 53.
10. Mariátegui, *Siete Ensayos*, 41.
11. Ibid., 41.
12. Ibid., 50.
13. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1985).
14. Mariátegui, *Siete Ensayos*, 150.
15. Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
16. Marc Becker, *Mariátegui and Latin American Marxist Theory* (U.S.: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1993), 42.
17. Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*.
18. Ibid., 117.
19. Becker, *Mariátegui and Latin American Marxist Theory*, 10.
20. Ibid., 46.
21. Ibid., 49.
22. Ibid.
23. Mariátegui, *Siete Ensayos*, 160.
24. Ibid., 113.
25. Becker, *Mariátegui and Latin American Marxist Theory*, 50.
26. José Carlos Mariátegui, *Temas de Educación* (Perú: Biblioteca Amauta, 1970), 21.
27. Leopoldo Zea, *El Positivismo en México: Nacimiento, Apogeo y Decadencia* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1968).
28. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (USA: Vintage Books, 1967), 97.
29. José Carlos Mariátegui, *El Alma Matinal y Otras Estaciones del Hombre de Hoy* (Lima: Biblioteca Amauta, 1964), 24.
30. Mariátegui, *Siete Ensayos*, 264.
31. See Genaro Carnero Checa, *La Acción Escrita: José Carlos Mariátegui Periodista* (Lima: Biblioteca Amauta, 1980).
32. See Sergio Fiengo Villena, Fernando Mayorga, Carlos de la Torre, and Anibal Quijano, *Neopopulismo y Democracia: Estudios Andinos* (Costa Rica: Programa Costa Rica, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 1997).