

Essay Two: “The Problem of the Indian”

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A New Approach

ANY TREATMENT OF THE PROBLEM of the Indian—written or verbal—that fails or refuses to recognize it as a socio-economic problem is but a sterile, theoretical exercise destined to be completely discredited. Good faith is no justification. Almost all such treatments have served merely to mask or distort the reality of the problem. The socialist critic exposes and defines the problem because he looks for its causes in the country’s economy and not in its administrative, legal, or ecclesiastic machinery, its racial dualism or pluralism, or its cultural or moral conditions. The problem of the Indian is rooted in the land tenure system of our economy. Any attempt to solve it with administrative or police measures, through education or by a road building program, is superficial and secondary as long as the feudalism of the gamonales continues to exist.^[1]

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. The judge, the subprefect, the commissary, the teacher, the tax collector, all are in bondage to the landed estate. The law cannot prevail against the gamonales. Any official who insisted on applying it would be abandoned and sacrificed by the central government; here, the influences of Gamonalismo are all-powerful, acting directly or through parliament with equal effectiveness.

A fresh approach to the problem of the Indian, therefore, ought to be much more concerned with the consequences of the land tenure system than with drawing up protective legislation.

The new trend was started in 1918 by Dr. Jose A. Encinas in his *Contribuci3n a una legislaci3n tutelar indigena*, and it has steadily gained strength.^[2] But by the very nature of his study, Dr. Encinas could not frame a socio-economic program. Since his proposals were designed to protect Indian property, they had to be limited to legal objectives. Outlining an indigenous homestead act, Dr. Encinas recommended the distribution of state and church lands. Although he did not mention expropriating the land of the latifundium gamonales, he repeatedly and conclusively denounced the effects of the latifundium system^[3] and, thereby, to some extent ushered in the present socio-economic approach to the Indian question.

This approach rejects and disqualifies any thesis that confines the question to one or another of the following unilateral criteria: administrative, legal, ethnic, moral, educational, ecclesiastic.

The oldest and most obvious mistake is, unquestionably, that of reducing the protection of the Indian to an ordinary administrative matter. From the days of Spanish colonial legislation, wise and detailed ordinances, worked out after conscientious study, have been quite useless. The republic, since independence, has been prodigal in its decrees, laws, and provisions intended to protect the Indian against exaction and abuse. The gamonal of today, like the encomendero of yesterday, however, has little to fear from administrative theory; he knows that its practice is altogether different.

The individualistic character of the republic's legislation has favored the absorption of Indian property by the latifundium system. The situation of the Indian, in this respect, was viewed more realistically by Spanish legislation. But legal reform has no more practical value than administrative reform when, confronted by feudalism intact within the economic structure. The appropriation of most communal and individual Indian property is an accomplished fact.] The experience of all

countries that have evolved from their feudal stage shows us, on the other hand, that liberal rights have not been able to operate without the dissolution of feudalism.

The assumption that the Indian problem is ethnic is sustained by the most outmoded repertory of imperialist ideas. The concept of inferior races was useful to the white man's West for purposes of expansion and conquest. To expect that the Indian will be emancipated through a steady crossing of the aboriginal race with white immigrants is an anti-sociological naivete that could only occur to the primitive mentality of an importer of merino sheep. The people of Asia, who are in no way superior to the Indians, have not needed any transfusion of European blood in order to assimilate the most dynamic and creative aspects of Western culture. The degeneration of the Peruvian Indian is a cheap invention of sophists who serve feudal interests.

The tendency to consider the Indian problem as a moral one embodies a liberal, humanitarian, enlightened nineteenth-century attitude that in the political sphere of the Western world inspires and motivates the "leagues of human rights." The anti-slavery conferences and societies in Europe that have denounced more or less futilely the crimes of the colonizing nations are born of this tendency, which always has trusted too much in its appeals to the conscience of civilization. Gonzalez Prada was not immune to this hope when he wrote that "the condition of the Indian can improve in two ways: either the heart of the oppressor will be moved to take pity and recognize the rights of the oppressed, or the spirit of the oppressed will find the valor needed to turn on the oppressors."^[4] The Pro-Indian Association (1900-1917) represented the same hope, although it owed its real effectiveness to the concrete and immediate measures taken by its directors in defense of the Indian. This policy was due in large measure to the practical, typically Saxon idealism of Dora Mayer,^[5] and the work of the Association

became well known in Peru and the rest of the world. Humanitarian teachings have not halted or hampered European imperialism, nor have they reformed its methods. The struggle against imperialism now relies only on the solidarity and strength of the liberation movement of the colonial masses. This concept governs anti-imperialist action in contemporary Europe, action that is supported by liberals like Albert Einstein and Romain Rolland and, therefore, cannot be considered exclusively Socialist.

On a moral and intellectual plane, the church took a more energetic or at least a more authoritative stand centuries ago. This crusade, however, achieved only very wise laws and provisions. The lot of the Indian remained substantially the same. Gonzalez Prada, whose point of view, as we know, was not strictly Socialist, looked for the explanation of its failure in the economic essentials: "It could not have happened otherwise; exploitation was the official order; it was pretended that evils were humanely perpetrated and injustices committed equitably. To wipe out abuses, it would have been necessary to abolish land appropriation and forced labor, in brief, to change the entire colonial regime. Without the toil of the American Indian, the coffers of the Spanish treasury would have been emptied."^[6] In any event, religious tenets were more likely to succeed than liberal tenets. The former appealed to a noble and active Spanish Catholicism, whereas the latter tried to make itself heard by a weak and formalist criollo liberalism.

But today a religious solution is unquestionably the most outdated and antihistoric of all. Its representatives—unlike their distant, how very distant, teachers—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.^[7] If the church could not accomplish its task in a medieval era, when its spiritual and intellectual capacity could be

measured by friars like Las Casas, how can it succeed with the elements it commands today? The Seventh-Day Adventists, in that respect, have taken the lead from the Catholic clergy, whose cloisters attract fewer and fewer evangelists.

The belief that the Indian problem is one of education does not seem to be supported by even a strictly and independently pedagogical criterion. Education is now more than ever aware of social and economic factors. The modern pedagogue knows perfectly well that education is not just a question of school and teaching methods. Economic and social circumstances necessarily condition the work of the teacher. 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.^[8] The modern school—assuming that in the present situation it could be multiplied at the same rate as the rural school-age population—is incompatible with the feudal latifundium. The mechanics of the Indian's servitude would altogether cancel the action of the school if the latter, by a miracle that is inconceivable within social reality, should manage to preserve its pedagogical mission under a feudal regime. The most efficient and grandiose teaching system could not perform these prodigies. 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. When this truth becomes partially understood, the saving formula is thought to be discovered in boarding schools for Indians. But the glaring inadequacy of this formula is self-evident in view of the tiny percentage of the indigenous school population that can be boarded in these schools.

The pedagogical solution, advocated by many in good faith, has been discarded officially. Educators, I repeat, can least afford to ignore economic and social reality. At present, it only exists

as a vague and formless suggestion which no body or doctrine wants to adopt.

The new approach locates the problem of the Indian in the land tenure system.

Notes

1. In my prologue to *Tempestad en los Andes* by Valcarcel, an impassioned and militant champion of the Indian, I have explained my point of view as follows:

“Faith in the renaissance of the Indian is not pinned to the material process of ‘Westernizing’ the Quechua country. The soul of the Indian is not raised by the white man’s civilization or alphabet but by the myth, the idea, of the Socialist revolution. The hope of the Indian is absolutely revolutionary. That same myth, that same idea, are the decisive agents in the awakening of other ancient peoples or races in ruin: the Hindus, the Chinese, et cetera. Universal history today tends as never before to chart its course with a common quadrant. Why should the Inca people, who constructed the most highly-developed and harmonious communistic system, be the only ones unmoved by this worldwide emotion? The consanguinity of the Indian movement with world revolutionary currents is too evident to need documentation. I have said already that I reached an understanding and appreciation of the Indian through socialism. The case of Valcarcel proves the validity of my personal experience. Valcarcel, a man with a different intellectual background, influenced by traditionalist tastes and oriented by another type of guidance and studies, politically resolved his concern for the Indian in socialism. In this book, he tells us that ‘the Indian proletariat awaits its Lenin.’ A Marxist would not state it differently.

“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 have ceased to consider it

abstractly as an ethnic or moral problem and we now recognize it concretely as a social, economic, and political problem. And, for the first time, we have felt it to be clearly defined.

“Those who have not yet broken free of the limitations of a liberal bourgeois education take an abstractionist and literary position. They idly discuss the racial aspects of the problem, disguising its reality under a pseudo-idealistic language and forgetting that it is essentially dominated by politics and, therefore, by economics. They counter revolutionary dialectics with a confused critical jargon, according to which a political reform or event cannot solve the Indian problem because its immediate effects would not reach a multitude of complicated customs and vices that can only be changed through a long and normal evolutionary process.

“History, fortunately, dispels all doubts and clears up all ambiguities. The conquest was a political event. Although it abruptly interrupted the autonomous evolution of the Quechua nation, it did not involve a sudden substitution of the conquerors’ law and customs for those of the natives. Nevertheless, this political event opened up a new period in every aspect of their spiritual and material existence. The change in regime altered the life of the Quechua people to its very foundations. Independence was another political event. It, too, did not bring about a radical transformation in the economic and social structure of Peru; but it initiated, notwithstanding, another period of our history. Although it did not noticeably improve the condition of the Indian, having hardly touched the colonial economic infrastructure, it did change his legal situation and clear the way for his political and social emancipation. If the republic did not continue along this road, the fault lies entirely with the class that profited from independence, which was potentially very rich in values and creative principles.

“The problem of the Indian must no longer be obscured and confused by the perpetual arguments of the throng of lawyers and writers who are consciously or unconsciously in league with the latifundistas. The moral and material misery of the Indian is too clearly the result of the economic and social system that has oppressed him for centuries. This system, which succeeded colonial feudalism, is Gamonalismo. While it rules supreme, there can be no question of redeeming the Indian.

“The term Gamonalismo designates more than just a social and economic category: that of the latifundistas or large landowners. It signifies a whole phenomenon. Gamonalismo is represented not only by the gamonales but by a long hierarchy of officials, intermediaries, agents, parasites, et cetera. The literate Indian who enters the service of Gamonalismo turns into an exploiter of his own race. The central factor of the phenomenon is the hegemony of the semi-feudal landed estate in the policy and mechanism of the government. Therefore, it is this factor that should be acted upon if the evil is to be attacked at its roots and not merely observed in its temporary or subsidiary manifestations.

“Gamonalismo or feudalism could have been eliminated by the republic within its liberal and capitalist principles. But for reasons I have already indicated, those principles have not effectively and fully directed our historic process. They were sabotaged by the very class charged with applying them and for more than a century they have been powerless to rescue the Indian from a servitude that was an integral part of the feudal system. It cannot be hoped that today, when those principles are in crisis all over the world, they can suddenly acquire in Peru an unwonted creative vitality.

“Revolutionary and even reformist thought can no longer be liberal; they must be Socialist. Socialism appears in our history not because of chance, imitation, or fashion, as some superficial minds would believe, but because it was historically inevitable. On the one hand, we who profess socialism struggle logically and consistently for the reorganization of our country on Socialist bases; proving that the economic and political regime that we oppose has turned into an instrument for colonizing the country on behalf of foreign imperialist capitalism, we declare that this is a moment in our history when it is impossible to be really nationalist and revolutionary without being Socialist. On the other hand, there does not exist and never has existed in Peru a progressive bourgeoisie, endowed with national feelings, that claims to be liberal and democratic and that derives its policy from the postulates of its doctrine.”

2. Gonzalez Prada had already said in one of his early speeches as an intellectual agitator that the real Peru was made up of the millions of Indians living in the Andean valleys. The most recent edition of *Horas de lucha* includes a chapter called “Nuestros indios” that shows him to be the forerunner of a new social

conscience: “Nothing changes a man’s psychology more swiftly and radically than the acquisition of property; once his viscera are purged of slavery, he grows by leaps and bounds. By simply owning something, a man climbs a few rungs in the social ladder, because classes are divided into groups classified by wealth. Contrary to the law of aerostatics, what weighs the most goes up the most. To those who say schools the reply is schools and bread. The Indian question is economic and social, rather than pedagogic.”

3. “Improving the economic condition of the Indian,” writes Encinas, “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.” *Contribución a una legislación tutelar indígena*, p. 39. Encina says elsewhere (p. 13): “Legal institutions related to property are derived from economic necessities. Our civil code is not in harmony with economic principles because it is individualistic. Unrestricted property rights have created the latifundium to the detriment of Indian property. Ownership of unproductive land has condemned a race to serfdom and misery.”

4. Gonzalez Prada, “Nuestros indios,” in *Horas de lucha*, 2nd ed.

5. Dora Mayer de Zulen summarizes the character of the Pro-Indian Association in this way: “In specific and practical terms, the Pro-Indian Association signifies for historians what Mariategui assumes to be an experiment in the redemption of the backward and enslaved indigenous race through an outside protective body that without charge and by legal means has sought to serve it as a lawyer in its claims against the government.” But, as appears in the same interesting review of the Association’s work, Dora Mayer believes that it tried above all to create a sense of responsibility. “One hundred years after the republican emancipation of Peru, the conscience of the governors, the gamonales, the clergy, and the educated and semi-educated public continued to disregard its responsibilities to a people who not only deserved philanthropic deliverance from inhuman treatment, but to whom Peruvian patriotism owed a debt of national honor, because the Inca race had lost the respect of its own and other countries.” The best result of the Pro-

Indian Association, however, was, according to Dora Mayer's faithful testimony, its influence in awakening the Indian. "What needed to happen was happening; the Indians themselves were learning to do without the protection of outsiders and to find ways to redress their grievances."

6. Gonzalez Prada, Horas de lucha.

7. "Only the missionary," writes Jose Leon y Bueno, one of the leaders of Accion Social de la Juventud, "can redeem and make restitution to the Indian. Only he can return to Peru its unity, dignity, and strength by acting as the tireless intermediary between the gamonal and the resident hacienda laborer and between the latifundista and the communal farmer; by preventing the arbitrary acts of the governor, who heeds solely the political interests of the criollo cacique; by explaining in simple terms the objective lessons of nature and interpreting life in its fatality and liberty; by condemning excesses during celebrations; by cutting off carnal appetites at their source; and by revealing to the Indian race its lofty mission." Boletin de la A.S.J., May, 1928.

8. It is well known that the production—and also the smuggling—of cane alcohol is a profitable business of the hacendados of the sierra. Even those on the coast exploit this market to some extent. The alcoholism of the peon and the resident laborer is indispensable to the prosperity of our great agricultural properties.