

De Castro, Juan E. *Bread and Beauty: The Cultural Politics of José Carlos Mariátegui*. Historical Materialism Book Series volume 217. Brill, 2021. 256 pp.

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In early 2019, an exhibition opened at the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid titled *The Avant-garde Networks of Amauta: Argentina, Mexico, and Peru in the 1920s*. According to the exhibition website: “Without doubt, the Peruvian journal *Amauta* (1926–1930), founded and directed by José Carlos Mariátegui (Moquegua, Peru, 1894 – Lima, Peru, 1930), was one of the most influential publications in twentieth-century art”. Curated by Beverley Adams and Natalia Majluf, the exhibition, which later travelled to the Museo de Arte de Lima, the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico, and the Blanton Museum in Austin, Texas, succeeded in giving *Amauta*, and by extension, Mariátegui, the visibility that they clearly deserve. Perhaps to the surprise of some, the exhibition was reviewed glowingly in both the *Financial Times* and *The Economist*, publications that do not usually celebrate the work of Marxists. *The Economist* piece is full of praise for the exhibition and Mariátegui, but its ultimate purpose is banal: to remind the reader of the many failings of the contemporary left in Latin America, while holding up Mariátegui as a blueprint for a better left, a left *comme il faut*. Of course, *The Economist* conveniently fails to mention that the contemporary left, the left of Chávez, Morales, the Kirchners, Lula, even Bachelet, came about in no small part as a reaction to the failures of the neoliberal policies that *The Economist* has consistently promoted.

What the exhibition made particularly evident, and what often gets omitted from considerations of *Amauta*, due to the tendency to focus narrowly on texts while ignoring the abundant visual culture that made it so attractive and innovative, is that the art in *Amauta* says as much about the key themes of the journal and indeed about Mariátegui’s oeuvre as the texts: from political economy, to indigenismo, to the avant-garde, to politics, etc. Juan E. De Castro’s volume is equally concerned with the connections between aesthetics and politics though, like most scholars, he too focuses primarily on Mariátegui’s writings and has relatively little to say about the visual culture of *Amauta* or about Mariátegui’s broader visual repertoire and archive (see for example the near 200 photographs in the Archivo Mariátegui: <https://www.mariategui.org>). The book includes one photograph, which shows Mariátegui, slouching in his wheelchair, flanked by a group of friends (which include several painters, one an Argentine, another a future leader of the

Peruvian Communist Party as well as two Jewish immigrants from Romania) in the Bosque de Matamula. As De Castro suggests, and whose sentiment informs the approach of the book:

the photograph can be interpreted as representing Mariátegui's personal and intellectual world. His simultaneous interest in art and politics, his cosmopolitanism, his intense belief in friendship, his refusal to let physical or any other limitations strangle his thought and creativity, can all be inferred from the image. (pp. 1-2)

Organized in largely thematic chapters, *Bread and Beauty* covers a range of issues, some well-trodden in the scholarship on Mariátegui, others less so. The introduction provides an excellent overview of the scholarship on Mariátegui and shows how different generations have repurposed Mariátegui to different ends. Most importantly, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a generation of scholars “rediscovered” Mariátegui as a theorist of a new type of left-wing, even revolutionary, politics, aligned in spirit with the Cuban Revolution and the Latin American New Lefts. The fall of the Berlin Wall and, in Peru, the experience of the Shining Path insurgency, helped to shift the study of Mariátegui in new directions, with greater attention to Mariátegui's less well-known writings and interests, his transnational intellectual networks, his correspondence, and to his role as a key cultural commentator in Peru and Latin America. Although not mentioned by De Castro, the journal *Anuario Mariateguiano* published eleven issues between 1989 and 1999 that played a key role in this shift. This broader approach to Mariátegui is clearly visible in the edited volume *La Aventura de Mariátegui: Nuevas perspectivas*, published in 1995, also oddly omitted from the overview of the literature. More recently, as De Castro notes, Mariátegui has been rethought again from postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, though not always very convincingly.

Following a useful biographical account in chapter 2, which gives the reader a good overview of the key phases in Mariátegui's life from childhood until his death, the other chapters take a more thematic approach. They cover the influence of Sorel on Mariátegui's thought (chapter 3), race and, crucially, racism in Mariátegui's writings (chapter 4), the tensions between nationalism and cosmopolitanism in Mariátegui's political and cultural outlook (chapter 5), Mariátegui's writings on literature and film (focusing on Bergson, Chaplin, Vallejo and others) (chapter 6), Mariátegui's debates with Haya de la Torre and APRA and his own political project (chapter 7), Mariátegui's connections with Buenos Aires, which explores both the allure of Argentina for Mariátegui and his struggles with the Comintern (chapter 8), and finally, and perhaps most originally, the connections between Mariátegui and Che Guevara. An epilogue discusses the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano's contrasting readings of Mariátegui in the 1970s (Mariátegui as revolutionary theorist) and 2000s (Mariátegui as a decolonial pioneer) in order to reaffirm the

key point in the book that “Quijano’s post-1989 theoretical turnabout can also be seen as representative of the changes in the reception of Mariátegui among what remains of the left-leaning intelligentsia, but, more generally, of the evolution of thinking about society during the last thirty or forty years” (224).

Although many of these issues have been explored before, and De Castro makes good use of the extensive “mariateguiana,” the value of the book is that it brings together these different strands of new research on Mariátegui while offering new perspectives that build on but also challenge the interpretations of authors such as Alberto Flores Galindo and, as we have seen, Quijano. Generally, De Castro strikes the right balance, and is to be commended for calling out interpretations that overstretch the evidence (for example, on the links between Mariátegui and Gramsci, 38-43). Some interpretations did not entirely convince me: for example, while De Castro is right to contextualize Mariátegui’s racist comments, his racial thinking was less original (and therefore less redeemable) than De Castro suggests—like others, he too believed that Indians needed to be “improved” and “uplifted,” though not with education or labor as many contemporaries believed—with socialism. More could have been said about Mariátegui’s views on feminism and women, and more generally about gender. But, overall, the book has much to tell us about the cultural politics of Mariátegui but also about the state of research on Mariátegui. As such it should be read with care by those who are new to Mariátegui and who will want to use this book to begin to explore his political and cultural thought and praxis, as well as those who are familiar with Mariátegui and who will want to engage with De Castro’s welcome and important contribution.