

# On Mariátegui's plural spatiotemporal concept of history

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**Abstract:** In what follows, I will provide some elements for constructing Mariátegui's *plural spatiotemporal* conception of history. I will do so by focusing on the two books he published in his lifetime: *The contemporary scene* and *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*. In a footnote in the *Seven Essays*, the reader encounters a concept that opens up the problem of plural temporality in Latin American Marxism: *relativismo histórico* (historical relativism). This will be the keystone concept upon which certain fragments of Mariátegui's writings will be put together to construct the concept of plural temporality. This involves taking a detour through what Mariátegui understood by *relativismo* (relativism). In that detour, we find that Mariátegui's use of *relativismo* consists in translating and assimilating the insights of one of the pillars of contemporary physics: Einstein's theory of relativity. For Mariátegui, the relativistic theory of spacetime undermined the old "absolutes" of the positivist unilinear philosophy of history. I then argue that Mariátegui, through his friend and comrade Hugo Pesce, assimilates and translates the "revolutionary" theory of spacetime as a weapon against the unilinear philosophy of history and as a resource to construct a concept of plural spatiotemporal concept of history. Re-situating Mariátegui's work along this axis puts some pressure on certain Bergsonian and Sorelian readings that overemphasize the importance of Myth and Humanity as a "metaphysical animal" and thereby tend to underemphasize or outright suppress his creative assimilation and translation of the sciences of his time.

**Keywords:** Mariátegui, plural temporality, Latin American Marxism, Einstein, Bergson.

## 1. Latin American Marxism and plural temporality

This dossier series poses the problem of plural temporality within "Latin American Marxism". One difficulty when defining the tradition under the name of "Latin American Marxism" is establishing a criterion of inclusion. Two necessary conditions that might be of use are as follows, "Latin American Marxism" thinks (1) the tendencies of capitalism (which is always global and globalizing) and (2) the specificity of Latin American reality within capitalism. The first condition involves the proper name of "Marx"

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and “Marxism”. And the second condition concerns the heterogeneous reality that can be put under the name of “Latin America” (again, in some sense to be elaborated, and which involves the living elements of pre-capitalist practices). Do these conditions suffice to define “Latin American Marxism”? This dossier posits a third necessary condition concerning the problem of historical time<sup>1</sup>.

If Marxism is to think the specificity of the history of Latin America and its place with respect to the development of capitalism as a whole, then it must *criticize* a dominant philosophy of history that produces a *unilinear* concept of history. That is, it must criticize a concept of historical time that is *unitary* (time is understood as a single line) and *teleological* (predestines those deemed “backward” to follow the same developmental path as the most “advanced”). So the third necessary condition for defining a “Latin American Marxism” is to (3) critique the philosophy of history that produces a unilinear concept of historical time<sup>2</sup>.

The unilinear philosophy of history – when deployed as a guide for political practice – has justified a governance strategy in which, for example, those deemed to be “backward” with respect to the timeline of development ought to be governed by the most “advanced”. For instance, in the history of Latin America, the effects of domination produced by political practice under the direction of this unilinear concept of historical time are evidenced in the 19th century’s foundational narratives of the *criollo* nation-state and its “positivist” justification of technical and scientific “progress” under capitalism<sup>3</sup>. And in the history of Marxist political practice, this effect of domination is expressed, for example, in the evolutionary reformism of the Second International as a non-eventual overcoming of capitalism. Both political practices – “civilizing” liberal progressivism and evolutionary socialist reformism – are guided by a teleological and unitary concept of historical time. In contrast, the heterogenous tendency that can be named “Latin American Marxism” flows from José Carlos Mariátegui’s philosophical practice and swerves from this liberal and socialist scientific positivism and its unilinear philosophy of history<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> These conditions swerve from the problem of a *proper* or *authentic* “Latin American philosophy”. For an account of this approach see Mendieta (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Admittedly this leaves out certain Marxist thinkers in Latin America that might satisfy the first two conditions but not the third.

<sup>3</sup> To this day, the Brazilian republic has Auguste Comte’s positivist lemma “*Ordem e progresso*” inscribed in the center of its national flag.

<sup>4</sup> On the history of “positivism” in Latin American philosophy in general see Dussel (2003). On the history of philosophical positivism and Marxist philosophy’s reaction to it in Perú in particular see Salazar Bondy (1967).

So the third necessary condition for defining “Latin American Marxism” involves critiquing this unilinear concept of historical time. But here, “critique” also involves, at the same time, a production of another concept of historical time that can think the heterogeneity of co-existing plural temporalities. This modified third condition is as follows: (3\*) critique the unilinear philosophy of history and produce an alternative conception of historical time. One such alternative concept of historical time is that of plural temporality.

It is important to note that the concept of historical time of “plural temporality” is distinct not only from the *progressive* concept just mentioned but also from the *cyclical* concept. To put it simply, in a cyclical conception of historical time, archaic social practices will – inevitably – at some point overturn the present and rule once again. For example, Walter Mignolo’s account of the *Pacha Kuti* involves such a concept of cyclical historical time<sup>5</sup>. In that sense, one might ask whether such a concept of historical time involves a distinction with a difference from the dominant unilinear philosophy of history. It turns out that both the progressive and cyclical conceptions are *unitary* insofar as they represent time as a single line. A straight or circular line represents historical time as *a* line. Furthermore, both are *teleological* in that they predestine the overcoming of the present either through an ascending line of progress or a circular rotation.

In contrast to this unilinear conception, what has been thematized as “plural temporality” posits a multiplicity of interweaving and conflicting lines or “non-synchronous synchronicities”<sup>6</sup>. This concept of historical time opens up history to multiple possible paths – even as the tendencies of capitalism strive to synchronize these plural temporalities towards its processes of accumulation.

Mariátegui’s conception of historical time is situated within the problematic of plural temporality. The difficulty, however, is that while Mariátegui criticizes the unilinear concept of history, his specific conception of historical time and method of inquiry must still be constructed. This is also the case with other Marxist philosophers that think within the problematic of plural temporality; their respective accounts of plural temporality have to be constructed from specific concepts. Here I am thinking of

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<sup>5</sup> In Quechua, *Pacha Kuti* names a turning-over (*kuti*) of spacetime (*pacha*). Mignolo (2011, 158) states that “Pacha Kuti, instead, belongs to an imaginary of cyclical repetitions and regular transformations of the natural/social world”. While other concepts of *Pacha Kuti* exist in Andean practices, I explicitly mention Mignolo’s because of its widespread circulation in Anglophone academic circles.

<sup>6</sup> See Morfino (2020; 2018).

Louis Althusser's "temporalité différentielle" (differential temporality) in *Reading Capital* and Ernst Bloch's "Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen" (simultaneity of non-simultaneity or synchronicity of non-synchronicity) in *Heritage of our times*<sup>7</sup>. Other accounts of plural temporalities in Marxist philosophy can be found in Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" and Antonio Gramsci's formulations in "Some aspects of the southern question"<sup>8</sup>. As a wide array of recent investigations have shown, an excavation of the problematic of historical time in Marx's and Marxist philosophy more generally demonstrates a persistent "underground current of plural temporality"<sup>9</sup>. Mariátegui's case, in this regard, is no different. Mariátegui's *differentia specifica* is his capacity to translate and assimilate distinct practices across manifold temporalities and geographies.

So in what follows, I will provide some clues for constructing Mariátegui's *plural spatiotemporal* conception of history. I will do so by primarily focusing on the two books he published during his lifetime, *The contemporary scene* and *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* (*Seven Essays* from now on). In a footnote in the *Seven Essays*, the reader encounters a concept that opens up the problem of plural temporality in Latin American Marxism: *relativismo histórico* (historical relativism). This will be the keystone concept upon which specific fragments of Mariátegui's writings will be put together to construct the problematic of plural temporality in Mariátegui's texts. Constructing such problematic will involve taking a detour through what Mariátegui understood by *relativismo* (relativism).

This detour, in turn, will involve following two paths that intersect and diverge. The first is the well-trodden path of Mariátegui's "creative" Marxism – his "assimilation" and "translation" of the active elements of philosophical practices (Bergsonian vitalism), political practices (Sorel's Myth of the general strike) and pre-capitalist practices (the Andean *ayllu*)<sup>10</sup>. The second path is relatively untraveled in that it follows Mariátegui's "assimilation" and "translation" of scientific practices, particularly Einstein's theory of relativity. By following Mariátegui's agonizing maneuvers through these paths – between "Bergson" and "Einstein" – that different elements will be recovered to construct the problematic of plural temporality. But before that, by way of introduction, I want to briefly sketch out the broad-

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<sup>7</sup> See Althusser (1996, 237-267); Bloch (1932, 97-150).

<sup>8</sup> On Gramsci see Peter Thomas' and Fabio Frosini's essays in Morfino (2018); on Benjamin see Tomba (2013).

<sup>9</sup> Tomba (2013); Morfino (2018); Bensaïd (2002); Arruzza (2015); Harootunian (2015); Tombazos (2014).

<sup>10</sup> On Sorel, see Paris (1978a; 1978b).

er context of the dominant “positivist” philosophy of history that Mariátegui’s “creative” Marxism criticized.

## **2. Mariátegui’s agonic path between Bergson and Einstein**

Mariátegui is widely considered a foundational figure of Latin American Marxist philosophy<sup>11</sup>. And this is not because he was the “first interpreter” of Marx in Latin America, but instead because he is the first to meet the three aforementioned necessary and sufficient conditions. What distinguishes him from other Latin American Marxists is his critique of positivism and its unilinear historical time, as well as his alternative concept and method of *relativismo histórico*. As it concerns Mariátegui’s critique of positivism, much has been said of the influence of Bergsonian vitalism and of Sorel’s Myth. But, I will argue that it is equally important to consider Mariátegui’s translation and assimilation of Einstein’s theory of relativity and its effects on his concept of time. This is what distinguishes Mariátegui’s open and creative Marxist philosophical practice: a capacity to assimilate and translate the most active elements of other practices (artistic, philosophical, scientific...) across distinct temporalities and geographies.

Before Mariátegui, there were several generations of Marxist militants, philosophers, and social scientists in Latin America. As Horacio Tarcus, the Argentine historian of the Latin American left, has pointed out, there are at least three generations that precede Mariátegui’s generation: (1) that of the exiled French *communards* of the 1870s; (2) that of the “scientific socialism” brought by the German emigres of 1880’s; and (3) the predominantly Argentine university scholars of the 1890s like José Ingenieros and Juan B. Justo (the founder of the Argentine Socialist Party and the first translator of Marx’s *Capital* into Spanish)<sup>12</sup>. Lastly, Tarcus delineates a (4) fourth generation that founded the first Communist Parties of the 1920s<sup>13</sup>. Mariátegui is within this last generation.

By way of introduction, allow me to quote a rather long fragment from a letter Mariátegui wrote to an Argentine journalist in 1927 – three years before his death and one year before he published the *Siete Ensayos*. In

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<sup>11</sup> Dussel (2003); Löwy (2007); Salazar Bondy (1967); Aricó (1978); Sobrevilla (2005). For a recent overview of the debates concerning Mariátegui’s Marxist philosophical practice see Montoya Huamani (2018).

<sup>12</sup> Tarcus (2007).

<sup>13</sup> There is extended debate as to whether Mariátegui actually founded a “Communist” Party. See Flores Galindo (1980).

that letter, Mariátegui sketches out a brief history of his brief – but very creative – life,

I was born in [18]95. At 14 years of age, I got into a newspaper as an assistant. Until 1919 I worked in daily journalism, first in *La Prensa*, later in *El Tiempo*, and lastly in *La Razón*. In this last daily we promoted the university reform movement. From 1918, nauseated by *criollo* politics, I turned resolutely toward socialism, breaking with my first attempts at being a *literato* full of *fin-de-siècle* decadence and Byzantinism, then in full bloom. From late 1919 to mid-1923 I traveled through Europe. I lived for more than two years in Italy, where I married a woman and some ideas. I traveled through France, Germany, Austria, and other countries. My wife and child prevented me from reaching Russia. From Europe, I joined some Peruvians for socialist action. My articles from that period mark the steps of my socialist orientation. Upon my return to Peru, in 1923, in reports, in lectures at the Student Federation, in the People's University, in articles, etc., I explained the European situation and began my work of investigating [the] national reality following the Marxist method. In 1924 I came, as I have already told you, close to losing my life. I lost a leg and was left in feeble health. I would surely have already recovered entirely with a tranquil existence. But, neither my poverty nor my intellectual restlessness [*inquietud intelectual*] permits it. I have not published any more books than those you already know. I have two ready and, in progress, two more. That is my life in a few words. ... I forgot: I am self-taught [*autodidacta*]. I once enrolled in *Letters* in Lima but was only interested in taking a Latin course on [St] Augustine. And, in Europe, I freely attended some courses, but without ever deciding to lose my extra-collegiate, and perhaps anti-collegiate, status. In 1925, the Student Federation nominated me to the University as an instructor in the field that is my specialty, but the Rector's ill will and, probably, my ill health spoiled that initiative.<sup>14</sup>

Mariátegui was extraordinarily eclectic. He read as fast as he wrote – and as a trained journalist, he was constantly writing<sup>15</sup>. In his travels throughout Europe, he “married” the ideas of the artistic avant-garde, the breakthroughs of scientists, the passion of revolutionary communists, and the corroding anti-positivist philosophies.

The dominant philosophy of history, which had direct political consequences throughout the 19th century and early 20th century Latin America, is often related to the positivism of August Comte. The proximate cause of Mariátegui's “travels” (or forced exile) through Europe in late 1919 was the effect of liberal positivism in Perú, particularly in the so-called *civilista* party of Augusto B. Leguía. In this context, positivism pointed to gradual progress that will be achieved by modernization, name-

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<sup>14</sup> As cited in Traverso (2021, 281-2). I made some slight modifications to the translation.

<sup>15</sup> Ricardo Felipe Portocarrero Grados. Private communication.

ly, through “scientific-rationalist thinking and methods, which governed the study of science”<sup>16</sup>. This is one reason why the critique of the positivist, progressive philosophy of history is often also conflated with a critique of scientific rationality as such.

Another French philosopher emerges as a foil to positivism: Henri Bergson. According to Aníbal Quijano, Bergsonian vitalism was the “ideological fountainhead” of much of the Latin American reactionary figures of the early 1920s, but also of Mariátegui’s own socialist critique of positivism – of both Leguía and the interwar socialist movement.<sup>17</sup> Here is a recent characterization of Mariátegui’s “revolutionary Bergsonism” (by way of Sorel’s Myth) provided by Hanneken:

Where the nineteenth century’s reigning philosophical models of liberalism and positivism compelled Peruvian elites to assess their society’s lack of ‘progress’ through the rationalist view of the Hegelian march of history or of social Darwinism, vitalism legitimized a nonlinear, nonrational conception of modernity. This conception was in line with widespread convictions about the “Decline of the West” and European decadence inspired by the outbreak of World War I. Furthermore it [Bergsonian vitalism] allowed for the revalorization of non-Occidental, premodern, and “primitive” cultures that science and reason had pronounced naturally and irrefutably inferior...<sup>18</sup>

So Mariátegui’s “revolutionary Bergsonism” functions both as a critique of the positivist progressive philosophy of history in Latin America as well as a broader critique of “science and reason”. But does Mariátegui posit an opposition between so-called “premodern” practices and those of “science”? Is it the case that Mariátegui assimilates or translates Bergsonian vitalist metaphysics against “science”? Firstly, it is ironic that this view of Bergson as “nonrational” and anti “science” aligns rather well with the views of many of Bergson’s scientific and rationalist philosophical detractors (e.g., Bertrand Russell)<sup>19</sup>. Secondly, throughout the years after his return from exile in Europe, Mariátegui did not cease producing spaces of encounter between so-called “modern” and “premodern” practices, which precisely disrupted what might be called the *reductio ad dominationem* (*reduction to domination*) of scientific practice.

Hanneken’s work astutely reconstructs a part of Mariátegui’s “revolutionary Bergsonism”. The reconstruction begins with a quote from one of Mariátegui’s last essays in which he states: “Historically, the philosophy

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<sup>16</sup> Moore (2014, 24).

<sup>17</sup> Quijano (1982, 75).

<sup>18</sup> Hanneken (2019, 196). Emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> Canales (2015, 13).

of Bergson has coincided, as no other intellectual element, with the ruin of bourgeois idealism and rationalism and with the death of the old absolute...<sup>20</sup>. This essay, dating from 1929, has since been published as a “Brief epilogue” to the talks Mariátegui had dictated in 1923. Mariátegui comments on the great “events” of the past 25 years, which involve not just Bergson’s *L’évolution créatrice* and Sorel’s *Réflexions Sur La Violence* but also Einstein’s “revolutionary” theory of relativity.

And it is also worth noting that Mariátegui does not mention Bergson without qualification. He states that while Bergson’s philosophy led to the “ruin” of “the old absolute,” it has also revived “old superstitions” (“*viejas supersticiones*”) of reactionary circles. After Bergson, Mariátegui mentions Sorel, whose political and philosophical practice is read as a parallel revolutionary practice to vitalist metaphysics. Sorel is credited with a creative rejuvenation of socialist ideas against the reformist positivism and evolutionism of the second international.

After outlining the creative philosophical tendencies and rejuvenation that both Bergson and Sorel brought about, Mariátegui turns to the creative potential of the sciences. Mariátegui writes: “Science, despite the pessimistic predictions of those who rushed to proclaim its liquidation at the turn of the century – disenchantments linked to the twilight of positivism – has continued its revolutionary action in the West prior to the war”<sup>21</sup>. What examples does Mariátegui provide in his assessment of science’s “revolutionary action”? He immediately writes, “With his discoveries in physics and mathematics, Einstein has supplied philosophical speculation a vast material that is as rich as it is unforeseen”. So, it is the revolutionary action of scientific practices – he also mentions Freud, alongside Einstein – which has supplied philosophical practice with ideas that make the “old absolutes” tremble.

Furthermore, Mariátegui carefully separates the “pessimist” critique of positivism from the critique of science as such and singles out the creative – even “revolutionary” – action of the sciences. As he will do elsewhere (such as in *Defensa del marxismo*) Mariátegui distinguishes reformist/positivist/scientism from the “revolutionary action” of scientific practice. While I cannot reconstruct Mariátegui’s conception of the sciences – a work that remains to be done – it suffices, for now, to state that Mariátegui’s “revolu-

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<sup>20</sup> As cited in Hanneken (2019, 194).

<sup>21</sup> “La ciencia a pesar de los pesimistas augurios de quienes precipitadamente proclamaron su bancarrota cuando se acentuaron los desencantos finiseculares anexos al caso del positivismo, ha continuado en el Occidente pre-bélico su acción revolucionaria” in Mariátegui (1959, 201).

tionary Bergsonism” cannot so easily be counterposed to “science” as such. And as we will see, Mariátegui seems to maintain this agonic position – as it were, “between” Bergson and Einstein – from his return to Lima in 1923 to the last years of his life.

This tension also constitutes the tense but creative interweaving of spatiotemporalities that we find in Mariátegui’s philosophical practice. As he writes in the 1926 Presentation of the avant-garde magazine *Revista Amauta*:

The goal of this magazine is to pose, clarify and understand Peruvian problems from both a *doctrinaire and scientific point of view*. But we will always consider Peru within a global panorama. *We will study all the great struggles for political renovation, philosophical, artistic, literary, and scientific*. All that is human is ours. This magazine will connect the new humans of Peru, first with other peoples [pueblos] of the Americas and immediately after that with all the other peoples of the world.<sup>22</sup>

So Mariátegui’s creative Marxism is not a critique of scientific practice as such, but rather, of its capture by positivistic reformism. Furthermore, I will argue, Mariátegui will find a common ally in his critique of the linear philosophy of history in the developments in physics at the turn of the 20th century. In particular, he finds that *relativismo* (which, as he explicitly states, includes Einstein’s theory of relativity) is one of the proximate causes of Europe’s “civilizational crisis”.

In the theory of relativity, Mariátegui finds a theory of time that makes the old “absolutes” tremble. It is Einstein’s theory that provides Mariátegui – by way of his collaborator and comrade Hugo Pesce – a scientific framework he assimilates and translates as a plurality of spacetimes. I will show that the key concept that Pesce recovers from Einstein’s theory is that of the *relativity of simultaneity*<sup>23</sup>.

In contrast with the antinomian theses of Mariátegui’s “revolutionary Bergsonism” that (1) conflate the critique of the positivist unilinear philosophy of history with a critique of science and (2) counterpose pre-modern practices with “modern” “scientific” practices, I will show that for Mariátegui the sciences are an ally in the fight against the unilinear philosophy

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<sup>22</sup> “El objeto de esta revista es el de plantear, esclarecer y conocer los problemas peruanos desde puntos de vista doctrinarios y científicos. Pero consideraremos siempre al Perú dentro del panorama del mundo. Estudiaremos todos los grandes movimientos de renovación políticos, filosóficos, artísticos, literarios, científicos. Todo lo humano es nuestro. Esta revista vinculará a los hombres nuevos del Perú, primero con los de los otros pueblos de América, enseguida con los de los otros pueblos del mundo” in Mariátegui (1926, 3). Emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> Pesce (1928).

of history and its dominating political effects<sup>24</sup>. Mariátegui's *relativismo histórico* is inspired by the revolutionary physical theory of spacetime.

Unfortunately, even though Bergson's name appears as often as Einstein's in Mariátegui's writings (often in tandem), relatively little ink has been used to reconstruct the physicist's incidence on the thought of the Latin American Marxist. Take, for example, Harry Vanden's famous account of Mariátegui's intellectual influences, which briefly gestures at the influence of the physicist<sup>25</sup>. In the vast bibliography written about Mariátegui in the past century, I could only find one relevant reference<sup>26</sup>.

In a November 1961 edition of the *Aprista* newspaper *La Tribuna*, Arturo Honores Esquivel published a brief essay titled "La relatividad en el pensamiento de Mariátegui" ("Relativity in Mariátegui's thought")<sup>27</sup>. More than a philosophical argument, the essay is a polemic. Just a few paragraphs long, it definitively asserts why the true inheritor of Mariátegui's "relativismo histórico" is Haya de la Torre's "espacio-tiempo-histórico" ("historic-space-time") – the *Aprista*'s philosopher's "application" of Einstein's theory of relativity to history. Esquivel takes this as irrefutable proof that – by way of Einstein – Haya de la Torre "overcomes" Marxist philosophy ("superación de la filosofía marxista"). Unfortunately, Esquivel does not elaborate further. It is difficult to understate the importance of the Mariátegui-Haya de la Torre debate for the history of Latin American politics and the ongoing encounters (and missed encounters) between so-

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<sup>24</sup> Swerving from such antinomy entails a systematic account of Mariátegui's conception of "Myth" and "reason". For a rigorous and creative account of Mariátegui's philosophical practice's complex relation between "Myth" and "reason" see Oshiro Hiro (2013). To construct his account, Oshiro Hiro takes a fascinating detour through the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza.

<sup>25</sup> Vanden (1975, 80) states: "Podría considerarse que la teoría de la relatividad de Einstein haya contribuido a que Mariátegui pensase que debía formular un tipo de socialismo peruano adaptado a la realidad peruana y latinoamericana. Si tal fuera el caso, cabría señalar la amplia cultura e interés de Mariátegui". Other brief mentions of the influence of the theory of relativity can be found in Forgues (1995, 34): "Si al ser concebida como proceso, como movimiento, la verdad de Mariátegui es una verdad siempre renovada y por lo tanto una verdad siempre de actualidad, al verse definida por la relación espacio-tiempo, aparece sobre todo como una verdad que participa, voluntariamente o no, de la teoría de la relatividad generalizada de Alberto Einstein, premio Nobel de física en 1921, quien, según afirma admirativamente el Amauta en *Historia de la crisis mundial...*".

<sup>26</sup> Roullion (1963) is an incredible resource that contains a bibliography that dates from Mariátegui's time up to 1962. For more recent bibliographic resources see Vanden (1979) and Walker (1986).

<sup>27</sup> Esquivel (1961).

cialist internationalism and nationalist populism<sup>28</sup>. It is fascinating, if not puzzling, to think that in one of the first debates between socialist internationalism and national populism in Latin America, it is possible to find the imprint of the theory of relativity. I will have to defer an account of the effects of “relativity” in this debate to future work but suffice it to say that Mariátegui’s assimilation and translation of the theory of relativity are not an “overcoming” of Marxist philosophy.

More recently, Brais D. Outes-León’s essay “The Politics of Relativity” and my work have sought to reconstruct the influence of one of the pillars of 20th-century physics in Mariátegui’s thought<sup>29</sup>. Outes-León’s work is noteworthy in this regard. It reconstructs the various scattered fragments of Mariátegui’s fascination with relativistic physics and the creative elements of the sciences of the early 20th century (not just Freud’s theory of the unconscious but also Hugo Marie de Vries’s theory of genes, among others). Outes-León also places Mariátegui within the tradition that is critical of positivism and scientism as inaugurated by José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel* and influenced by Bergsonian vitalist metaphysics (among other philosophies) – all while carefully distinguishing such a critique from a critique of science as such.

However, what Outes-León finds most relevant in Mariátegui’s assimilation and translation of relativity is the justification of Mariátegui’s “cultural relativism”. It is “Einstein’s relativity and Spengler’s cyclical history,” Outes-León writes, that “provide Mariátegui with the foundations for an all-out assault on the ideologies of the capitalist world order, or what he calls “el Absoluto Burgués [the bourgeois absolute]”<sup>30</sup>. While I agree that *relativismo* is an attack of the “old Absolute,” Mariátegui’s concept of history is not cyclical<sup>31</sup>. Because, as just mentioned, a circle still entails *a* line. Instead, what Mariátegui’s Marxist philosophical practice translates and assimilates of relativity is its radical discovery of *a plurality of spacetimes*.

One of the main discoveries of Einstein’s theory is the *relativity of simultaneity* (*Relativität der Gleichzeitigkeit*). And with a plurality of spacetimes, there is no Absolute “Here” and “Now” – there is no absolute simultaneity. The incidence of relativity’s postulates in Marxist philosophy’s problematic of plural temporality remains to be developed. Some recent work has attempted to move in this direction.

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<sup>28</sup> For a historical account of the Haya de la Torre-Mariátegui debate which also includes primary documents see Martínez de la Torre (1948). See also Kohan (2000).

<sup>29</sup> Outes-León (2020) and Stark (2020).

<sup>30</sup> Outes-León (2020, 298).

<sup>31</sup> This has consequences for considerations of Mariátegui’s relationship with a certain “restorationist” tendency of *indigenismo*.

In an essay that programmatically delineates some boundaries of the problematic of plural temporality in the Marxist tradition, Morfino opens up his discussion on the various conceptions of time in the western tradition by citing *The Order of Time*<sup>32</sup>. In this popular science book, the physicist Carlo Rovelli characterizes the concept of time in Einstein's theory of relativity. He writes that relativity posits that there is a single time for each point in space. Therefore, it is possible to conceive of an infinite number of times, each of which might be measured with an infinite number of clocks, in relation to infinite frames of reference, all of which might be in different states of motion relative to each other. A similar situation is noted concerning space: distances can be measured in relation to each frame of reference with an infinite number of rulers relative to each frame of reference and its state of motion. In this sense, the theory of relativity – a theory of spacetime and one of the fundamental pillars of 20th-century physics – dismantles the absolute concept of space and time put forth, for example, in Newton's *Principia* in which events transpire within a single universal time inside a single continuum of space. These absolute notions of space and time leave their mark on Kant's transcendental idealist philosophy, even if not in their Newtonian/realist variation<sup>33</sup>.

Against the grain of the unilinear concept of historical time, Rovelli affirms that for the theory of relativity, “[t]he world is not like a platoon advancing at the pace of a single commander. It’s a network of events affecting each other”<sup>34</sup>. There is no absolute *present*. There is no absolute *here* that contains all events across the universe. And if there is no absolute ruler or clock, then there is no such thing as absolute *simultaneity* either. Events are found to be simultaneous in relation to specific frames of reference. Simultaneity is, therefore, relative. Hence, relativity theory's *relativity of simultaneity* (*Relativität der Gleichzeitigkeit*).

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<sup>32</sup> Morfino (2020) and Rovelli (2018).

<sup>33</sup> For an account of Kant's criticism of the Newtonian conception of absolute space and time see Friedman p. 140. What I am suggesting here is that despite Kant's critique of the Newtonian absolute *reality* of space and time (i.e. that they are “actual entities”) it is possible to show that transcendental idealism nonetheless must accept their *absoluteness*. More specifically, it is possible to show that in the Transcendental Aesthetic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant nonetheless accepts an *ideal* absolute space and absolute time insofar as he adopts Newton's ground of absoluteness. That is, Kant displaces the absolute grounding from Newton's transcendent God towards the internal a priori forms of sensibility of the transcendental subject. Therefore, the Kantian “Copernican revolution,” in part, consists in “subjectivizing” Newton's absolute divine “container” of absolute space and time.

<sup>34</sup> Rovelli (2018, 16).

Given this conception of time, Morfino mentions that the problematic of plural temporality in the Marxist tradition – more specifically in the links that pass through Gramsci, Bloch, and Althusser – “is inspired by this type of horizon”. Nonetheless, the Italian philosopher warns that “the difficulty of passing between the level of physics and the level of history cannot be overestimated”<sup>35</sup>. Here we encounter a problem still to be thought of, namely, that of the incidence of relativistic physics in Marxist philosophy’s conceptions of plural temporality. This is a philosophical problem insofar as it concerns the question of the *uses* of ideas produced in one *milieu*, that is, ideas produced by one specific practice and how these ideas are then taken up or translated into the *milieu* of another practice. For example, how ideas produced by scientific practice are taken up by Mariátegui political practice. It is a problem that concerns what might be called a philosophical theory of the *encounter of practices*. A problem concerning the “assimilation” or “translation” by Marxist philosophy of what is posited by other political, philosophical, scientific, and artistic practices<sup>36</sup>. Unfortunately, we will have to leave this problem aside for now, but it concerns the characterization of Mariátegui’s philosophical practice as an *open Marxism*<sup>37</sup>.

Let me now, finally, turn to the series of texts Mariátegui wrote after he returned to Lima from his “European exile” that set the stage for his plural spatiotemporal conception of historical time in the *Seven Essays*.

### **3. *Relativismo* and the “civilizational crisis”**

In 1923 Mariátegui returned to Lima from his political exile in Europe. Leguía’s forces strongly “suggested” his deportation to the “old continent”. In Europe, Mariátegui witnessed the potential of the 1917 Bolshevik rev-

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<sup>35</sup> Morfino (2020, 91)

<sup>36</sup> Harootunian (2015) is an impressive and wide-ranging account of the concept of historical time in the Marxist tradition. It follows Marx’s own characterizations of capitalist development (very roughly: formal, real and hybrid subsumption), passing through Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky and the shift “eastward” as well as “south” of Marxist practices (Gramsci, Mariátegui, Wang Yanan, Yamada Moritarō and Uno Kōzō). Throughout *Marx after Marx*, the concept that threads through the chapters is that of “synchronous asynchronicities” or “simultaneous non-simultaneities” as elaborated by Ernst Bloch. Even though there is very little discussion of Bloch’s concept and its development, the German Marxist theorist develops the concept in tandem with physics’ non-Euclidean theory of spacetime: the theory of general relativity. In this sense, the theory of relativity has had an effect not only on Mariátegui but on the creative Marxist philosophers concerned with the theme of plural temporality as a whole.

<sup>37</sup> For an overview of Mariátegui’s “open Marxism” see Montoya Huamaní (2018).

olution and the emergence of the socialist and communist movements in Italy, France, and Germany that were quickly converging in the party as its main organizational form. While there, Mariátegui also witnessed the ruins of the first world war. For him, these are symptoms of a decadent bourgeois civilization. But what Mariátegui will characterize as a “civilizational crisis” also carries with it the potential of creating a new civilization – a communist society. And it is this emancipatory promise which lies in the creative potential of the crisis that he will carry with him back to Lima.

As he gets off the boat in Lima, Mariátegui is interviewed by the magazine *Variedades*. During the interview, published in May of 1923, he is asked about “his conception of life”. To this question, Mariátegui responds: “This is a metaphysical question. And metaphysics is no longer in fashion. Einstein, the physicist, interests the world much more than the metaphysician Bergson”<sup>38</sup>. Mariátegui posits a disjunction: Bergson, the metaphysician, on one side, Einstein, the physicist, on the other. And he seems to take the side of the physicist.

How are we to understand this enigmatic disjunction? If this interview is any indication of his “best apprenticeship” (“mejor aprendizaje”) during his exile in Europe, Mariátegui seems to be displacing the importance of “Bergson” and metaphysics for “Einstein,” the physicist. While seemingly taking the side of the latter against the former. This is very enigmatic for a certain reading of Mariátegui which, as briefly mentioned in the previous section, over-emphasizes the “Bergsonian” side of his Marxism as against the “sciences”. Moreover, why does he mention *these* proper names? Why Bergson and Einstein? And why now?

My argument is that Mariátegui’s disjunction is a cryptic reference to the 1922 debate between the then well-established French philosopher Henri Bergson and the then relatively unknown German physicist Albert Einstein at the *Société française de philosophie*. This debate expressed the missed encounter between philosophy and physics as it concerns the problem of time and simultaneity – and, one might add, the reconstruction efforts of French-German relations in the wake of The Great War<sup>39</sup>.

The historian of science Jimena Canales has constructed this “debate” and its political, philosophical, and scientific consequences in her excellent book *The Physicist and the Philosopher: Einstein, Bergson, and the Debate*

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<sup>38</sup> Mariátegui (1955:138): “[e]sta es una pregunta metafísica. Y la Metafísica no está de moda. El físico Einstein interesa al mundo mucho más que el metafísico Bergson”.

<sup>39</sup> See Canales (2015). For the broader debates on the politics and economics of time synchronization that Einstein and relativity theory was entangled with see Galison (2004).

*That Changed Our Understanding of Time*. Canales reconstructs the encounter between Einstein and Bergson – which had broad and quick repercussions all around the world – and shows that the philosopher wanted to defend the role of philosophy in questions concerning time. One of the most relevant ideas in the debate was the concept of *simultaneity*.

Canales writes that “Einstein had shown that ‘our belief in the objective meaning of simultaneity’ as well as that of absolute time had to be forever ‘discarded’ after he had successfully ‘banished this dogma from our minds.’” And furthermore, “The physicist had shown that ‘space by itself, and time by itself’ were two concepts ‘doomed to fade away into mere shadows’”<sup>40</sup>. So while Bergson admits that Einstein’s theory shocks our “natural, intuitive notion of simultaneity,” the philosopher still maintained relativity’s clocks could not solely define simultaneity<sup>41</sup>. So even if in the 1922 debate between Bergson and Einstein, the physicist famously sentenced that the time of the philosophers did not exist (“*Il n’y a donc pas un temps des philosophes; il n’y a qu’un temps psychologique différent du temps du physicien*”), the question remains open as to what to make of the concept of *historical time*. Einstein’s clocks cannot measure historical time.

So how are we to understand Mariátegui’s disjunction?<sup>42</sup> Mariátegui never explicitly clarifies his position, nor does he mention the Bergson-Einstein “debate” explicitly. But it is difficult to think that the allusion to these two names just a year after their encounter is not in some way referencing the debate between the physicist and the philosopher. Mariátegui does not say. And even as he devoted as many pages to Einstein as he did to Bergson, he never wrote any essays about either of them. It is known, however, that Mariátegui had a copy of Bergson’s *L’évolution créatrice* (*Creative Evolution*) in his personal library<sup>43</sup>. We also know that Mariátegui had in his personal library two books published in 1922 that sought to popularize the theory relativity – one by Lucien Fabre titled *Une nouvelle figure du monde: les théories d’Einstein* and

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<sup>40</sup> Canales (2015, 6).

<sup>41</sup> Canales (2015, 43).

<sup>42</sup> For an account of Mariátegui’s “bergsonism” see the essays in part III of Aricó (1978); Hanneken (2018); Löwy (2007).

<sup>43</sup> The Archivo José Carlos Mariátegui has allowed me to have access to these books in Mariátegui’s personal library. Curiously, his copy of Bergson’s book is signed by Eudocio Ravines. In the opening chapter of Mariátegui’s copy of *L’évolution créatrice* book, the reader can find the following text underlined in red “como geómetras, debemos rechazar lo no previsto”. Immediately next to this red underlining, but written with black ink, the following marginalia can be found: “¿Y Einstein?”

another by Gaston Moch titled *La relativité des phénomènes*<sup>44</sup>. In the concluding sentence of the first chapter, Moch states formulates the aforementioned discovery of the theory of relativity: “*la simultanéité est relative; le temps n’est pas quelque chose d’absolu*”<sup>45</sup>. Simultaneity is relative. Time is not something absolute.

It is impossible to know whether Mariátegui had a rigorous understanding of relativity in 1923. But in 1928, the young physician and collaborator Hugo Pesce published a brief essay in *Revista Amauta* titled “Poe precursor de Einstein”. As the editor of *Amauta*, Mariátegui must have, at the very least, *read* his comrade’s essay and, at most, *understood* what was at stake. In Pesce’s short essay, he finds a point of encounter between the poet and the physicist. Pesce goes as far as to say that Poe’s last prose poem, titled *Eureka*, “anticipates” Einstein’s theory of relativity. More specifically, the point at which these two meet is the *relativity of simultaneity*. Pesce writes: “Poe’s disdain for simultaneity...has a clear affinity with Einstein’s affirmation that ‘absolute simultaneity does not exist,’ which is related to the negation of ‘absolute time’ and the definition of ‘local time.’”<sup>46</sup>.

In a crucial essay on Mariátegui’s conception of history that focuses on the purported influence of Benedetto Croce in Latin American Marxist, Jaime Massardo also reconstructs Pesce’s influence in the development of the concept or method of historical inquiry developed in the *Siete Ensayos* – in the years prior to the debate with Comintern<sup>47</sup>. As far as I can tell, Mariátegui never explicitly mentions the “relativity of simultaneity,” but Pesce does, in the aforementioned article published in the magazine that Mariátegui himself edited. So rather than thinking that Mariátegui only had a crude conception of relativity as mere a “cultural relativism,” as Outes-León suggests,

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<sup>44</sup> These are but a subset of all of Mariátegui’s books—whose library was pillaged and decimated both after his death and during his life due to unrelenting political persecution. Nonetheless, as the Archivo José Carlos Mariátegui’s list shows, Mariátegui had many books on early 20th century science in his personal library — several of them from the collection *La bibliothèque de philosophie scientifique*. Of particular interest are those of the physiologist Albert Dastre (*La vie et la mort*) as well De Launay, Gustave Le bon, and Jakob Von Uexküll among others. For an incomplete list found of books in Mariátegui’s personal library see Vanden (1975) and Torres (2020).

<sup>45</sup> Moch (1922, 30).

<sup>46</sup> Pesce (1928) states: “El desprecio de Poe por la simultaneidad como argumento probatorio, tiene clara afinidad con la afirmación de Einstein de que ‘no existe simultaneidad absoluta’, íntimamente ligada a la negación del ‘tiempo absoluto’ y a la definición del ‘tiempo local’”.

<sup>47</sup> Massardo (2010). Pesce’s and Mariátegui’s interventions can be found in Mariátegui (1959b).

## *On Mariátegui's Plural Spatiotemporal Concept of History*

I would rather speculate that he understood, at some level, but did not write about, Einstein's theory of relativity's simultaneity of relativity, and its conception of plural spatiotemporality.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, Mariátegui's declarative disjunction provides clues to understand his account of the relation between "science" and how he characterizes the civilizational crisis. More importantly, this disjunction gives us some clues as to how Mariátegui will assimilate the theory of relativity and enlist "Einstein" alongside other emancipatory forces he assembles in the short decade of life after his return to Lima.

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A month after the *Varietades* interview on "Bergson" and "Einstein," Mariátegui is invited by Haya de la Torre to give a series of lectures at the *Universidad Popular "Gonzalez Prada"* in Lima. It is in these lectures – published in the book *Historia de la crisis mundial* – that he further sketches out the contours of the civilizational crisis and its creative potential<sup>49</sup>.

In the first session of the series – attended by workers and students with a certain militant revolutionary commitment – Mariátegui opens up the talk by clarifying that he is not there to give a lecture or a lesson. He is there to "study" the "history of the world crisis" alongside them<sup>50</sup>.

What is at stake in this crisis? For Mariátegui, this is a crisis from which the proletariat could emerge "victorious" over the "moribund" bourgeois society in so far as the proletariat heeded its lessons and understood the elements of the crisis<sup>51</sup>. Therefore, studying and understanding this civilizational crisis should prove relevant to the Peruvian proletariat because their future is intimately linked with the future of the European (and ultimately global) proletariat. This appeal to international solidarity, he says, is not a mere utopian "ideal". It is a "reality"<sup>52</sup>. It is a material effect of the increasingly globalized world of bourgeois-capitalist civilization. He rhetorically asks,

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<sup>48</sup> Outes-León (2020).

<sup>49</sup> Mariátegui (1959).

<sup>50</sup> Mariátegui (1959, 18).

<sup>51</sup> Mariátegui (1959, 18) states: "En esta gran crisis contemporánea el proletariado no es un espectador; es un actor. Se va a resolver en ella la suerte del proletariado mundial. De ella va a surgir, según todas las probabilidades y según todas las previsiones, la civilización proletaria, la civilización socialista, destinada a suceder a la declinante, a la decadente a la moribunda civilización capitalista, individualista y burguesa. El proletariado necesita, ahora como nunca, saber lo que pasa en el mundo".

<sup>52</sup> Mariátegui (1959, 18).

In another time, how long would it have taken Einstein to become so famous in the world? In these times, the theory of relativity – despite its complicated technicalities – has made its way around the world in just a few years. All these facts are one of the many signs of the internationalism and solidarity of contemporary life.<sup>53</sup>

The circulation and rapid popularization of the theory of relativity – despite its difficulty – is deployed as an expression of the reality of international solidarity. “Einstein” appears here as a sign of the times and the actuality of internationalism.

For Mariátegui, the civilizational crisis is global, and it can be read in multiple instances of what we might call, with Louis Althusser, “the open social whole” (i.e., the various instances that compose the social ensemble of practices: the economic, political, artistic, philosophical, and so on)<sup>54</sup>. In the notes of the talk, Mariátegui writes,

The world crisis is, then, an economic crisis and a political crisis. *And above all, it is an ideological crisis.* The affirmative, positivist philosophies of bourgeois society have been for some time undermined by a current of skepticism, of *relativism*. Rationalism, historicism, and positivism are declining irremediably. *Indubitably, this is the most profound, most severe symptom of the crisis.* This is the most definitive and profound indicator that it is just not the economy of bourgeois society that is in crisis but the whole of capitalist civilization, Western civilization, and European civilization in crisis.<sup>55</sup>

The emphasis on the “ideological” component as the most determinant element of the civilizational crisis breaks with an exclusively economic determinist account of historical materialism. But this heterodox formulation does not argue that it is there – in its philosophical expression – that the “essence” of the crisis can be read in its full transparency. All instances (not just philosophical, political, economic, artistic, and so on) of the crisis must be considered in their specificity, that is, in their *relative autonomy*. Nonetheless, it is in philosophical practice that the crisis appears “most de-

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<sup>53</sup> Mariátegui (1959, 165).

<sup>54</sup> See Althusser (1996, 237-267).

<sup>55</sup> Mariátegui (1959, 24) states: “La crisis mundial es, pues, crisis económica y crisis política. *Y es, además, sobre todo, crisis ideológica.* Las filosofías afirmativas, positivistas, de la sociedad burguesa, están, desde hace mucho tiempo, minadas por una corriente de escepticismo, de *relativismo*. El racionalismo, el historicismo, el positivismo, declinan irremediabilmente. Este es, indudablemente, *el aspecto más hondo, el síntoma más grave de la crisis.* Este es el indicio más definido y profundo de que no está en crisis únicamente la economía de la sociedad burguesa, sino de que está en crisis integralmente la civilización capitalista, la civilización occidental, la civilización europea”. Emphasis added.

finéd”. It is there that the “positivist” philosophies of history are challenged by what he calls “*relativismo*”.

#### **4. *Relativismo* against *positivismo***

Though not explicitly clarified in the aforementioned talks on the “civilizational crisis,” elsewhere, “relativism” is associated with both Einstein’s “new physics” (i.e., the theory of relativity) as well as with the literary works of Bernard Shaw and Luigi Pirandello. But the relevant concept of *relativismo* for me can be found in his conference notes on the “*Crisis filosófica*” (the “philosophical crisis”)<sup>56</sup>. Mariátegui was slated to give a talk specifically focused on the “philosophical crisis,” but he ended up not dictating it. In a facsimile of his talk on the “Philosophical crisis” – not published in the book *Historia de la Crisis Mundial* but available through his archive and later reprinted in *Mariátegui Total Vol. I* – he specifies the relation between “progress” and “relativism”:

The world has begun to doubt the effectiveness of progress; civilization has begun to not trust itself. Finally, the relativist tendency emerged. Relativism cannot be reduced to Einstein’s theory, which is already quite a bit. Einstein is but a physicist. His theory is called the theory of relativity not because Einstein had made it a relativistic philosophy but because he took as a starting point Galileo’s principle of relative motion. Relativism is a broad movement composed of a variety of different instances: artistic, scientific, etc.<sup>57</sup>

This further supports the argument that Mariátegui did not have a merely vulgar conception of “*relativismo*” as “cultural relativism”. Rather, he understood the historical development in scientific practice from Galilean relativity – still based on an *absolute* notion of simultaneity – to Einsteinian relativity. Furthermore, this quote supports the argument that

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<sup>56</sup> What is most difficult here is that Mariátegui often equivocates in his use of “relativism”. For example, he will sometimes use “relativism” alongside the concept of “skepticism”. This ambiguity makes tracking his use of “relativism” difficult. In this sense, reconstructing the relevant context is crucial.

<sup>57</sup> Mariátegui (1924), “El mundo comenzó a dudar de la efectividad del progreso, la civilización comenzó a desconfiar de sí misma. Finalmente, apareció la corriente relativista. El relativismo no se reduce a la teoría de Einstein que es ya bastante. Einstein no es sino un físico. Su teoría se llama teoría de la relatividad no porque Einstein la haya concebido como filosofía relativista sino Einstein ha tenido como punto de partida el principio el principio del movimiento relativo de Galileo. El relativismo es un vasto movimiento del cual forman parte diversos fenómenos artísticos, científicos, etc”.

Mariátegui conceived of “relativism” (Einsteinian and otherwise) as a challenge to positivism and its “progressive” philosophy of history.

Could it be that Einstein’s “new physics” bears the potential of being assimilated or translated for revolutionary proletarian struggle through a different conception of history that breaks with reformist positivism? For Mariátegui, the socialist movement after the war is split in two. On the one hand, the reformist social democrats and their progressive account of history. On the other hand, the revolutionary maximalism of the communist movement of 1917 and the creative turbulence and organizational forms it left in its wake. Mariátegui will hold on to this historical materialist characterization of the civilizational crisis – and its potential – until his death.

In a series of essays published as *Defensa del Marxismo* – which are contemporaneous with his *Seven Essays* and were first published in *Revista Amauta* – he defends Marxism’s scientificity in light of the crisis of positivism. In a series of polemics against Second International socialist Henri de Man, Mariátegui writes that “[t]he bankruptcy of positivism and scientism as a philosophy in no way compromises the position of Marxism. *Marx’s theory and politics are invariably founded on science, not scientism*”<sup>58</sup>. And then, he doubles down on the creative and open character of Marxism and its constant drive to “translate” and “assimilate” the most active elements of the sciences. Mariátegui writes,

If Marx could not base his political plans or his historical theories on De Vries’s biology, or Freud’s psychology, or Einstein’s physics, then none other than Kant would have had to content himself with Newtonian physics and the sciences of his era in elaborating his philosophy. Marxism in its later development – or rather, its intellectuals – has not failed to continually *assimilate* the most substantive and relevant of post-Hegelian or post-rationalist philosophical and historical speculation.<sup>59</sup>

As such, Mariátegui’s philosophical practice is one that constantly recreates itself and breaks with what might be called call autophagic Marxism – one that closes itself to the most active and revolutionary elements of a conjuncture.

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<sup>58</sup> Mariátegui (1959a).

<sup>59</sup> Mariátegui (1959<sup>a</sup>, 44) states “Si Marx no pudo basar su plan político ni su concepción histórica en la biología de De Vries, ni en la psicología de Freud, ni en la física de Einstein, ni más ni menos que Kant en su elaboración filosófica tuvo que contentarse con la física newtoniana y la ciencia de su tiempo: el Marxismo –o sus intelectuales– en su curso superior, no ha cesado de asimilar lo más sustancial y activo de la especulación filosófica e histórica post-hegeliana o post-racionalista”. Emphasis added.

So how does Mariátegui translate the most active elements in his conjuncture – such as, for example, the theory of relativity? He does this at two levels: one *conceptual* and another *mythical*. In the series of talks he gave at the Popular University, Mariátegui not only mobilized a *conceptual* register (i.e., the need to *understand* the crisis and its potential). He also rallied the figure of Einstein and relativity as a *creative myth*. If the theory of relativity has revolutionarily broken with the old Absolutes of Newtonian century-old physics – so can the Peruvian (and global) proletariat break with the Absolutes of a bourgeois civilization in crisis and no longer able to sustain its myth of “progress”. But Mariátegui also translates certain conceptual elements of the theory of relativity – the relativity of simultaneity and the plurality of spacetimes – into a concept of historical time and method of inquiry as *relativismo histórico*. This concept can be explicitly found in the *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* and can also be deduced from his method of inquiry in *La escena contemporánea*.

## **5. *Relativismo histórico* and plural spatiotemporality**

As is probably clear by now, Mariátegui is extraordinarily eclectic. And though he never wrote extensively about his Marxist philosophical practice, that is, about his method for understanding history, nor about his concept of historical time, it can be shown that he tended to approach reality through local spacetimes and their “reality”. It is from these local spacetimes that he then translates (or transforms) their specificities to uncover invariants at work across distinct geographies and temporalities. He associates this method with journalistic practice and the artistic practice of cinematography<sup>60</sup>. This is what he writes in his 1925 sketch of his “method” in the opening pages of his first book, *La escena contemporánea* (*The contemporary scene*):

I do not think it is possible to apprehend the entire panorama of the contemporary world through a single theory. Above all, it is impossible to arrest its movement through a single theory. *We must explore and know it, episode by episode, facet by facet.* Our judgment and imagination will always be delayed with respect to the entirety

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<sup>60</sup> For a reconstruction of Mariátegui’s “Marxist method” of “translation” see Arnall (2017). It is possible to consider what I am here calling Mariátegui’s translation of relativity as a “creative myth” with respect to what Arnall calls Mariátegui’s “prophetic” mode of translation. And similarly, Mariátegui’s “conceptual” translation of relativity’s plurality of spacetimes can be understood as what Arnall calls Mariátegui’s “theoretical” mode of translation.

of the phenomenon. Therefore, *the best method to explain and translate our time is perhaps partly journalistic and partly cinematographic.*<sup>61</sup>

*La escena contemporánea* brings together and develops many ideas already expounded in the talks published in *Historia de la crisis mundial* concerning the “civilizational crisis” and the crisis of philosophical and political positivism. Each of the chapters or essays of *La escena contemporánea* provides an episodic snapshot of the “contemporary scene” and the effects of the civilizational crisis in distinct local spacetimes.

More specifically, in *La escena contemporánea*, he focuses on each specific spatial unit and its present conjuncture set by the two-front war between, on the one hand, the revolutionary forces (most clearly expressed in the Bolshevik revolution and through the proper names of Lenin, Trotsky, Lunacharsky, and Zinoviev) and, on the other hand, the reactionary forces (“Il Duce” Mussolini but also the ambivalent support of artists such as D’Annunzio and Pirandello and philosophers such as Gentile and Croce). And, amid these two forces, Mariátegui finds a crumbling democratic-liberal civilization whose *dramatis personae* are Wilson, Lloyd George, and Keynes. The crisis of the Second International for Mariátegui also tracks the philosophical and political crisis of positivism and bourgeois democracy. And Mariátegui also looks to the “orient” and provides a sketch of the debate between Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore in India and maps the relationship between Islam and the Turkish revolution – local snapshots of episodes in distinct geographies and temporalities.

Following his method, while it is impossible to apprehend “the entire panorama of the contemporary world,” it is still possible to translate across different spacetimes. It is possible to *transform* between the contemporary scene’s many spacetimes (each with its own relative speed or rhythms). Even if there is no single Here and Now against which it is possible to measure the plurality of spacetimes, they are not hopelessly singular. Rather, their singularity is still assimilable, translatable, or *transformable* through a certain method. What grounds such a method is not a single and absolute timeline or space, but rather, the *invariant* of the *contemporary spacetime* against which variation can be measured. This is such that in that “transla-

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<sup>61</sup> Mariátegui (1925, 11-12) states, “Pienso que no es posible aprehender en una teoría el entero panorama del mundo contemporáneo. Que no es posible, sobre todo, fijar en una teoría su movimiento. *Tenemos que explorarlo y conocerlo, episodio por episodio, faceta por faceta.* Nuestro juicio y nuestra imaginación se sentirán siempre en retardo respecto de la totalidad del fenómeno. Por consiguiente, *el mejor método para explicar y traducir nuestro tiempo es, tal vez, un método un poco periodístico y un poco cinematográfico*”. Emphasis added.

tion” (now read as “transformation”), the invariants that make up the multiplicity of “our time” are expressed. So the concept of the *contemporary* (*contemporánea*) in *The Contemporary Scene* is not a single Here and Now. Rather, the *contemporary* entails an *invariant* that implicitly expresses the variations of a plurality of spacetimes. So while these spacetimes are all in motion, their relative movements can nonetheless be assimilated through translation (or transformation).

In this sense, the cinematographic and journalistic method is isomorphic with the measurement method in the theory of relativity. Suppose there is no longer an absolute simultaneity – a single “Now” nor an absolute “Here” that contains all events (as was the case in the Newtonian representation). In that case, each specific event is measured relative to a frame of reference and its state of movement relative to other frames of reference. If there is no universal clock or ruler, then the world has to be understood “episode by episode”. This plurality of spacetimes undermines our most intuitive sense of contemporaneity or simultaneity. A common thought experiment in the theory of special relativity helps to illustrate the *relativity of simultaneity*<sup>62</sup>.

Imagine a situation in which two generals – one French and the other German – are meeting inside a train to sign a peace treaty. To ensure that the peace treaty is signed at the same time by both parties, an ingenious solution is found. While sitting at two ends of the negotiating table inside a train wagon, a lightbulb placed equidistant between the two generals will turn on once it is time to sign. When the lightbulb turns on, both generals will sign the treaty, ensuring it is signed *simultaneously*.

As the wagon approaches a train platform where French and German crowds await the signing, the light bulb inside the train turns on, and both generals sign the peace treaty successfully. From the point of view of those inside the train, the signing is a success. Both parties see the lightbulb turn on and sign *at the same time* – simultaneously.

However, while those inside celebrate the peace treaty signing, they look outside to the train platform and are perplexed by the situation: the crowds on the platform have begun to fight. Those on the stationary platform claim that the German general, sitting in the *back* of the moving wagon, had signed the treaty first – well before the French general, sitting in the *front* of the train wagon could sign. The signing was, therefore, *not simultaneous*. The French had been swindled. So which perspective is cor-

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<sup>62</sup> This is one of the many variations of Einstein’s “train/embankment” thought experiment presented by Einstein’s 1915 pedagogical introduction to the theory of special and general relativity. See Chapter 9 of Einstein (2019).

rect? Could we perhaps use an absolute ruler and clock to resolve the issue of simultaneity? Was the peace treaty signing done *simultaneously* by both parties or was it not?

From the point of view (or “frame of reference,” or local spacetime) of someone standing on the platform, the German general gets hit with the light beam first. This is because he is sitting in the back of the wagon, so as the train moves forward, once the lightbulb turns on, the beam reaches him first because he is *moving towards* the light beam. From the point of view of that same person standing on the platform, the French general gets with the light beam second. This is because the French general is sitting towards the front of the wagon and is *moving away* from the lightbulb as the train moves forward, so the light beam struggles to catch up. This is a consequence of the constancy of the speed of light. For the German general, the distance the light travels to reach him in the back of the wagon is *shorter*, thereby taking *less time*. But for the French general, the distance the light travels to reach him in front of the wagon is *longer*, thereby taking *more time*. So from the local spacetime of the observer standing on the platform, the signing is *not simultaneous*.

Within the framework of the theory of special relativity, one concludes that, against our intuitive sense of space and time, *there is no absolute simultaneity*. Simultaneity is relative to different spacetimes and their relative speeds. There is no such thing as *contemporaneity* if by that is meant: an absolute Here and Now. There are infinitely many “here” and “now”. Perhaps, if no “single theory” can “apprehend” the “contemporary world,” Mariátegui also assimilated the idea of the relativity of simultaneity to Marxist theory.

Now, it is undoubtedly the case that in the relative speeds we are used to in our everyday lives, these relativistic effects are mathematically negligible and impossible to perceive. Nonetheless, in the last instance, our ordinary sense of *contemporaneity* does not hold. This is why the method of measurement of relativity implies that events must be understood with respect to their local spacetimes, “episode by episode, facet by facet”.

With this method, local observers, each with their relative velocities, can then compare their measurements. While these measurements are all distinct, they are nonetheless translatable or transformable, even if no unity of time or space grounds them. That is because the relativistic observer is not *in space* nor *in time* – it is not contained within an absolute background against which any given event is to be measured as delayed or advanced, but instead, it is in some sense situated in its local spacetime taking “episodic” measurements with its ruler and clock. Again, this does

not mean there is no translation between frames of reference. Within the framework of the theory of relativity, there is a precise mathematical way to translate between frames of reference: *the Lorentz transformation*. So while the relativity of simultaneity stipulates that each observer is “correct” with respect to their own frame of reference measurement of time and space, as demonstrated with the thought experiment of the relativity of simultaneity, it still posits an *invariant* across frames of reference. What is invariant is not time nor space alone, but rather, a geometric combination of time and space: *spacetime*<sup>63</sup>.

This translation between the physical theory of relativity and Marxist philosophy's plural spatiotemporal conception of history is not obvious. At worst, it is a superficial analogy. At best, it is the effect of a philosophical translation, assimilation – or even transformation – of an idea produced by a specific scientific practice. As mentioned before, and as the missed encounter between Bergson and Einstein demonstrates, time and space are not reducible to what can be measured by a clock or a ruler. In this sense, Mariátegui's *creative* translation of relativity is, perhaps, quite Bergsonian.

Nonetheless, it seems that elaborating a coherent framework for thinking about this translation problem between practices – in the case of Latin American Marxism and Marxist philosophy more generally – remains to be done. My working hypothesis is that this translation is at least implicit in Mariátegui's method. Mariátegui's journalistic-cinematographic – or even *relativistic* – method is at work in *La escena contemporánea* and in his *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*, where he first calls it “relativismo histórico”.

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In the *Seven Essays*, the name “Peru” is neither a historical nor a geographical unity. Its various geographies are a composite of distinct temporalities. Much like his account of the “contemporary scene,” the name “Peru” therefore names a composite of different *spacetimes*. Each of these has to be accounted for in its specificity, “episode by episode, facet by facet”.

Very schematically, Mariátegui posits that the historical “remnants” that “survive” in practices “today” involve at least three distinct temporalities: (1) the Incan, (2) the Spanish colonial, and (3) the national-bourgeois republic. It is important to note that these are composed of other conflicting temporalities. For example, the “Incan” involves not just the

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<sup>63</sup> It is difficult to translate between natural language and the mathematical formalism of special relativity. What I am referring to here is the four-dimensional spacetime manifold that is expressed as a differential:  $ds^2$ . This differential quantity is what is *invariant* across different frames of reference.

empire – which, Mariátegui argues, was destroyed by the Spanish colonial conquest – but also the practices of the *ayllu*, which “survive” to this day. Similar nuances might be noted with respect to the colonial and republican temporalities.

Moreover, these temporalities have to be also accounted for across distinct geographies. While the archaic communal practices of the *ayllu* may “survive” in the *sierras* (the Andean *highlands*), their effects are not easily traceable in the *costa* (for example, on the Lima *coast*). So, once again: there is no single “Here” and “Now” that contains that heterogeneous unity named “Peru”. It is the relativity of simultaneity that defines contemporaneous Peruvian reality.

And Mariátegui adds yet another vector: each of these local spacetimes must be accounted for in their relative movement with respect to distinct *practices*. Here is the third axis of variation that Mariátegui introduces (beyond the “observer” or “frame of reference” with its “ruler” and “clock”): how a plurality of spacetimes is differentially expressed in distinct *social practices*.

The spontaneous structure of the *Seven Essays* can be thought of as providing episodic snapshots with respect to different social practices. Very roughly, we can schematize the *Seven Essays* as undertaking an analysis of distinct spacetimes with respect to economic practice (essays 1 through 3), religious practice (essay 5); political practice (essays 4 and 6); and artistic, literary, and philosophical practice (essay 7). With respect to each distinct practice, Mariátegui traces the plural spacetimes in “Peruvian reality”.

For example, the first three essays (or chapters) deal with economic practice concerning the mode of production and relations of production (property relations) in the Incan, Colonial, and Republican temporalities in both the highlands and the coast<sup>64</sup>. But, as Mariátegui argues explicitly, these “moments” of the economy co-exist in a rather tense and conflicting “contemporaneity”. These different temporalities are interwoven and also vary across space. For example, Mariátegui writes in the first essay:

the elements of three different economies coexist in Peru today. Underneath the feudal economy inherited from the colonial period, vestiges of the indigenous communal economy can still be found in the sierra. On the coast, a bourgeois economy is growing in feudal soil...<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> The first three essays are titled, respectively: “Outline of the Economic Evolution”, “The problem of the Indian,” and “The problem of land”.

<sup>65</sup> Mariátegui (1928, 73).

Mariátegui carefully distinguishes the distinct geographies in this conflictive and tense co-existence of plural temporalities. In the *costa*, capitalist economic practices – “a bourgeois economy” – seem to flourish on “feudal soil”. In the *sierra*, in the highlands, the Andean economic (and political) practices of the *ayllus* – partially destroyed by colonialism – co-exist with the colonial-feudal economy and the encroaching tendencies of capitalist subsumption. The “Peruvian reality” is not a homogenous spatiotemporal container. Instead, Mariátegui’s plural spatiotemporal conception of history points to the specific “remnants” or “survivals” of the colonial past and the Incan past that co-exist in tension with the advancing capitalist economic practices.

The telluric metaphors in these passages have led Marxist historian Harry Harootunian to characterize Mariátegui’s method as a “stratigraphic history. Harootunian writes that: “with its vertical embodiment of coexisting layers of different historical societies from Peru’s past inscribed in the present” are those of the “original Andean indigenous communities”<sup>66</sup>. He then argues that given the civilizational crisis in the contemporary scene, Mariátegui’s “strategy of temporal reversal”<sup>67</sup> involves translating this “past” both by understanding it conceptually (as he does in the *Seven Essays*) and through a Myth that incites revolutionary action in the conjuncture. This is the creative potential latent in what Harootunian calls – via Bloch – the “simultaneous non-simultaneity” or “contemporary noncontemporary” historical time in the Peruvian reality<sup>68</sup>. While Harootunian does not seem to precisely define what is meant by “temporal reversal,” it is relevant at this point to clarify how Mariátegui’s method is distinct from an approach of “reversal” (or overturning) of an archaic past. Because if Mariátegui does posit a “strategy of reversal,” this would imply that Mariátegui’s historical method presupposes a “cyclical” conception of historical time.

But as I clarified in the introductory paragraphs above, a cyclical “reversal” or “turnover” still presupposes a unilinear conception of historical time. This concept, and its derivative strategy, contrasts with what I have called Mariátegui’s plural spatiotemporal concept. While it is possible that Mariátegui, in different instances, in different states of movement, affirmed *both* of these methods, it is nonetheless the case that a method that approaches historical time through a concept of a plurality of spacetimes such a “reversal” is not thinkable. Within the framework of plural spatiotemporality just outlined, the archeological or stratigraphic metaphor

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<sup>66</sup> Harootunian (2015, 143).

<sup>67</sup> Harootunian (2015, 141).

<sup>68</sup> Harootunian (2015, 143).

thins out. There is “ground” to turn over. In this framework, then, there is nothing to “reverse”. Mariátegui posits that all that exists are different practices in a “contemporary scene,” each containing different degrees of “survivals” of the past in their respective geographies.

So for the Marxist philosopher concerned with revolution, what matters is producing a concept of historical time that (1) understands what “survives” in each of these practices and (2) how these distinct spatiotemporalities can nonetheless be transformed or translated. For the revolutionary internationalist, this means translation both across the *sierra* and the *coast* but also across Peru and around the globe.

Swerving from the “strategy of reversal” as defined by Harootunian, Mariátegui affirms what he calls “historical relativism” (*relativismo histórico*). This concept is found in a footnote in the third essay of the *Seven Essays*. It is probably one of the most extended footnotes in the book, and Mariátegui criticizes Augusto Aguirre Morales, the author of *El pueblo del Sol*, for his “romantic” and “individualist” critique of Incan communism. He writes,

Modern communism is different from Inca communism. This is the first thing that someone who studies and explores the Tawantinsuyu needs to learn and understand. The two kinds of communism are products of different human experiences. They belong to different historical epochs. They were developed by different civilizations. The Inca civilization was agrarian. Marx’s and Sorel’s is an industrial civilization. In the former, man submitted to nature. In the latter, nature sometimes submits to man. It is absurd, therefore, to compare the forms and institutions of one communism to the other. The only thing that can be compared is their incorporeal essential similarities with respect to their *essential and material differences in time and space*. And for this comparison, we need a little bit of *historical relativism*.<sup>69</sup>

No possible “strategy of reversal” will somehow make the Incan civilization return. While Aguirre Morales approaches the Incan state with “liberal” and “individualist” presuppositions – from the perspective of the

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<sup>69</sup> Mariátegui (1928, 78) states, “El comunismo moderno es una cosa distinta del comunismo incaico. Esto es lo primero que necesita aprender y entender el hombre de estudio que explora el Tawantinsuyo. Uno y otro comunismo son un producto de diferentes experiencias humanas. Pertenecen a distintas épocas históricas. Constituyen la elaboración de disímiles civilizaciones. La de los inkas fue una civilización agraria. La de Marx y Sorel es una civilización industrial. En aquella el hombre se sometía a la naturaleza. En ésta la naturaleza se somete a veces al hombre. Es absurdo, por ende, confrontar las formas y las instituciones de uno y otro comunismo. Lo único que puede confrontarse es su incorpórea semejanza esencial, dentro de la diferencia esencial y material de tiempo y de espacio. Y para esta confrontación hace falta un poco de *relativismo histórico*”. Emphasis added.

decadent liberal and bourgeois civilization – Mariátegui finds this inadequate. Mariátegui calls this approach a “fallacious point of view” and distinguishes it from what he calls “*historical relativism*”.

Whereas the “fallacious point of view” approach asserts merely imposes “liberal” and “individualist” concepts on the Incan state, the “historical relativist” instead attempts to *translate* the “*essential and material differences in time and space*”. Rather than mechanically “copying” and “pasting” the presuppositions of a decadent civilization in crisis, historical relativism seeks to understand its distinctness and then searches for what survives of these practices in distinct geographies today. Mariátegui mentions that it is the political and economic practices of the *ayllu* – not the Incan state as such – that “survive” to this day. As such, rather than a “strategy of reversal,” what Mariátegui posits are a strategy of translation of distinct practices in their respective geographies of the “non-simultaneous simultaneity” he calls the “contemporary scene”.

A similar method (*historical relativism*) is at work in the subsequent chapters of the *Seven Essays*. For example, in the fourth essay, Mariátegui focuses on political practice as he attempts to understand the movements for educational reform (*reforma universitaria*) in Peru and Latin America. He argues that with respect to political practice, it is not bourgeois liberalism nor republican practices that dominate. Instead, under political practice, he finds yet another composite in which the colonial-feudal practices survive and impose themselves. This composite can be found in a persistent recalcitrant and conservative survival of what he calls the “aristocratic humanists”. So again, these temporalities are not simultaneous in political practice either. That is, they have not been synchronized with the one absolute time of “progress” of capitalism at the level of economic practice. This further clarifies another level of non-simultaneity. There is a spatial and temporal dislocation *within* each of the practices and in *between* them.

In the fifth essay, titled “The religious factor,” Mariátegui once again teases out the different spatiotemporalities of religious practices that make up the composite called “Peru”. This essay follows an extended discussion on “regionalism” in Peru (between the *sierra* and the *costa*, as previously mentioned). Lastly, in the seventh essay, Mariátegui turns to artistic, literary, and philosophical practices. He focuses on the literature of the colony and what he calls “the survival of colonialism” in contemporary literature. He is a masterful literary thinker, commenting and analyzing a wide array of writers and literary works, which range from his friend and mentor – the anarchist poet-philosopher Manuel González Prada, to “communist”

Cesar Vallejo, passing through Indigenist writers such as Luis E. Valcárcel. In literature, in contrast with the economic and political levels, there seems to be an actual rupture with the colonial in the *sierra* and the *costa*.

It is this in the composition of spatiotemporalities of Peruvian reality as embodied in the different practices (economic, political, artistic, religious...) that Mariátegui both criticizes the unilinear concept and produces a distinct concept of historical time and method of analysis. Rather, what might be called historical-geographical materialism – *relativismo histórico* – understands local practices in different spacetimes “episode by episode, facet by facet”. Only then can a Marxist philosopher concerned with demonstrating the common interests of the proletariat can translate across spacetimes and practices. It is this concept of historical time that puts forth an internationalist and communist Mariátegui concerned not with a strategy of “reversal” but rather a compositional strategy of contemporary practices: between so-called “archaic” and modern practices political, artistic, scientific, and philosophical. It is that philosophical concept of historical time and method, as well as its derivative political strategy, that remains a creative and vital tool of analysis and transformation for Marxists everywhere.

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