

DIRECTION

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The Indian Contribution to Latin America

Andres Iduarte

The subject of the Indian continues to be one of importance and responsibility in the Americas, because the Indian was American and still is American, notwithstanding the hardships under which he has lived and is still living on his own soil. It is a moral and intellectual obligation, at any time the subject of the Indian is raised, to study it with clear and honest thought in order to see through the injustices with which this topic is burdened. Neither the attacks upon nor the defense of the Indian have always been in the most conscientious minds.

As the other colored peoples of the Americas, the Indian was in the past and is at the present time a means of exploitation. Being at the same time the fundamental basis of the population of many Latin American countries, his problems have been discussed with prejudice due to greed and very seldom with fairness and justice.

Indian literature in Latin America, from its very inception, uses the Indian as a picturesque theme; at the same time Spanish literature begins to talk of the "barbaric past" of the Indian; notably in the works of Menendez y Pelayo, who denied any Indian influence in the spirit and art of the new nations.

The important thing is that in spite of these conflicts and the bitterness of the polemics against them the Indian maintains his standing as a cultural force. Particularly, of course, is this true in Mexico, Ecuador and Peru, as well as in the countries of Central America. Even in those lands where there are few Indians, vestiges exist of a glorious past of Indian culture. "The spirit of those men," says José Martí, "is in the very air and fills the nostrils of the countries in which they live and lived."

José Eusebio Caro and Julio Arboleda in Colombia, the Mexicans, Rodríguez Galván and José Joaquín Pesado, the Chilean Blest-Gana y Sanfuentes, the Argentinians, Ascasubi and Guido Spano, the Dominican Salomé Ureña, the Uruguayan Zorilla de Sanmartín, all have contributed to the development of Indian literary tradition. The Cuban speaks of *siboneyes*, the Venezuelan of *caribes*, the Guatemalans of *mayaquiches*. There are Indian temples and pyramids comparable only to those of ancient Babylon and Egypt. In Mexico and Peru, moreover, the Indian influence has always been strong, even during the Colonial period. The Mexican and Peruvian Indian spoke



Indian Painter of the Hopi tribe.

to the world through the rich prose of the Inca, Garcilaso. He in turn influenced the Creole writers, Juan Ruiz de Alarcón and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. The Indian hand was seen in the architecture and decoration of the great cathedrals; and in the famous Spanish tiles; the Indian voice enriches the Castillian accent, as it enriches the Spanish vocabulary.

The Indian has always been a fundamental factor in all phases of Mexican life. Among the leading spirits in the Mexican struggle for independence, two of the most illustrious, Morelos, and Guerrero, had mixed Indian blood, and perhaps Negro strains as well. Later, an Indian, Ignacio Ramírez, a man of classic culture, was the leader of a youth movement, and a polemicist who waged war on reactionary conceptions concerning the Indian. Another Indian, Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, was the acknowledged leader of the literary life of his day. The Indian, Benito Juárez, has become the symbol of the nation, and of its fight for independence. Even Porfirio Díaz, despite the fact that his reign was a reactionary one, was an Indian. In 1910, during the Revolution, the Indian masses joined the Mexican *mestizo*, and the white population, in their fight for freedom. The apostle of the peasants of Mexico was the Indian, Emiliano Zapata; the martyred President Madero was of course white; Pancho Villa, the *guerillero* of the Revolution, was a *mestizo*. The entire population, even among the *latifundists* and pseudo-aristocrats, reflects the Indian influence. The Mexicans know their Indian past. They recognize its influence in their history and in their blood. They know that their very characters are made of Indian fibres, and that it will be necessary to arouse the whole wretched population of Indians and *Mestizos* as well, if there is to be a firm

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basis for the *further* developments of social reforms and the cultural awakening now taking place in Mexico. This is felt in the paintings of Diego Rivera, where the cause of the Indian is championed. In the works of all the other great painters of Mexico, Orozco, Siquieros, Tamayo, Cantu, the Indian is ever present. If he is not actually seen on the canvas, his is the hand that often controls the brush. For many of these artists have Indian blood. The Indian strain is also strong in Silvestre Revueltas and Carlos Chavez, Mexican composers. It is also present in the novelists and poets, whether it appears as a tropic ray of sunshine, in the works of Pellicer, or in the delicate filigree of Villaurrutia's writings.

In the other countries of Latin America, the Indian has also found voice. He has even entered into the *aristocracy* of the Modernists. He has appeared in the poetry of the great Ruben Dario and of José Santos Chocano. But he has even gone further. Don Manuel Gonzalez Prada, the rebel teacher of Peru, took up the Indian cause and, followed by Clorinda de Matto de Turner, founded a movement for the vindication of the Indian which is today alive and strong throughout all South America. This is the *Aprista* movement, and to it belongs Ciro Alegria, brilliant Peruvian youth who has just won first prize in a contest for the best Latin-American novel, conducted by the Pan-American Union and a group of writers of both Americas.

Let us take another outstanding case—that of the poet Cesar Vallejo, who died in Paris in 1937. The critic, José Carlos Mariategui, saw in him one of the greatest exponents of the Indian spirit, because of the hidden emotion and stoic resignation which characterized his work and personality. He retained this temperament in spite of 20 years of exile in

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Europe. He is a symbol of the Indian love for freedom and justice, because this Indian of the high Sierras of Peru died loving Spain and its people with all his heart and soul. It was to the Loyalist cause that he dedicated his last verses and, in his own death agony, his last thoughts were of Spain.

Government, literature, poetry, painting, music, sculpture, science—all these the Indian has created in his native land. He is the common denominator of the whole of Latin America. He colors the emotions of the people, their dresses, their songs, their pottery, and their thoughts.

The development of a movement in favor of the Indian, based on admiration for his great past, and study of his contribution to culture, might be a very healthy thing for the Americas to engage in at this time. The capacity of the Indian for high development calls for a sweeping reversal of the conditions, under which he for the most part lives, exploited and degraded by poverty. The Indian is by no means a cultural factor of the past, alone. His full development will immeasurably enrich the whole artistic life of our continent. It will strengthen the whole quality of the Latin-American peoples, whom, because of the rich blend of their bloods, the philosopher Don José Vasconcellos called *the cosmic race*.

A pro-Indian movement of this sort would in no way hurt our allegiance to our Spanish culture and mother tongue, but, on the contrary, would add and multiply, instead of subtracting and dividing, as many groups are doing today. For the Indian is growing, day by day, to be one of the factors most alive in the struggle for progress and human rights in Latin America.

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