

Liberation Theology Marxism

Tuesday 25 October 2005, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: 2000).

In the first instance, liberation theology is a set of writings produced since 1971 by figures like Gustavo Gutierrez (Peru), Rubem Alves, Hugo Assman, Carlos Mesters, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff (Brazil), Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria (El Salvador), Segundo Galilea and Ronaldo Munoz (Chile), Pablo Richard (Chile and Costa Rica), José Miguel Bonino and Juan Carlos Scannone (Argentina), Enrique Dussel (Argentina and Mexico), and Juan-Luis Segundo (Uruguay) - to name only some of the best known.

But this corpus of texts is the expression of a vast social movement, which emerged at the beginning of the 1960s, well before the new works of theology. This movement involved considerable sectors of the Church - priests, religious orders, bishops - lay religious movements - Catholic Action, the Christian student movement, Christian young workers - pastoral committees with a popular base - labour, land and urban pastoral committees - and ecclesiastical base communities. Without the practice of this social movement - which might be called a Christianity of liberation - one cannot understand such important social and historical phenomena in Latin America over the last thirty years as the rise of revolution in Central America - Nicaragua and El Salvador - or the emergence of a new working-class and peasant movement in Brazil (the Workers' Party, the Landless Peasants' Movement, etc.). (1)

The discovery of Marxism by progressive Christians and liberation theology was not a purely intellectual or academic process. Its starting point was an unavoidable social fact, a massive, brutal reality in Latin America: poverty. A number of believers opted for Marxism because it seem to offer the most systematic, coherent and comprehensive explanation of the causes of this poverty; and because it ventured the only proposal sufficiently radical to abolish it. In order to struggle effectively against poverty, it is necessary to understand its causes. As the Brazilian cardinal Dom Helder Câmara puts it: 'As long as I was asking people to help the poor, I was called a saint. But when I asked: why is there so much poverty?, I was treated as a communist.'

It is not easy to present an overview of liberation theology's stance towards Marxism. On the one hand, we find a very great diversity of attitudes within it, ranging from the prudent employment of a few elements to a complete synthesis (e.g. in the 'Christians for Socialism' tendency). On the other, a certain change has occurred between the positions of the years 1968-1980, which were more radical, and those of today, which are more reserved, following criticisms from Rome, but also developments in Eastern Europe since 1989. However, on the basis of the works of the most representative theologians and certain episcopal documents, we can identify various common reference points. (2)

Some Latin American theologians (influenced by Althusser) refer to Marxism simply as a (or the) social science, to be used in strictly instrumental fashion in order to arrive at a more profound knowledge of Latin American reality. Such a definition is at once too broad and too narrow. Too broad, because Marxism is not the only social science; and too narrow, because Marxism is not only a science: it rests upon a practical option that aims not only to understand, but also to transform, the world.

In reality, the interest in Marxism displayed by liberation theologians - many authors speak of

'fascination' - is wider and deeper than borrowing a few concepts for scientific purposes might lead one to believe. It also involves the values of Marxism, its ethico-political options, and its anticipation of a future utopia. Gustavo Gutierrez offers the most penetrating observations, stressing that Marxism does not confine itself to proposing a scientific analysis, but is also a utopian aspiration to social change. He criticizes the scientistic vision of Althusser, who 'obscures the profound unity of Marx's œuvre and, as a result, prevents a proper understanding of its capacity for inspiring a revolutionary, radical and constant *praxis*. (3)

From which Marxist sources do the liberation theologians derive inspiration? Their knowledge of Marx's writings varies greatly. Enrique Dussel is unquestionably the figure who has taken the study of Marx's œuvre furthest, publishing a series of works on it of impressive erudition and originality. (4) But we also find direct references to Marx in Gutierrez, the Boff brothers, Hugo Assmann, and several others.

On the other hand, they show little interest in the Marxism of Soviet manuals of 'diamat' or of the Latin American communist parties. What attracts them is rather 'Western Marxism' - sometimes referred to as 'neo-Marxism' in their documents. Ernst Bloch is the most frequently cited Marxist author in *Liberation Theology: Perspectives* - Gutierrez major inaugural work of 1971. In it we also find references to Althusser, Marcuse, Lukács, Henri Lefebvre, Lucien Goldmann, and Ernest Mandel. (5)

But these European references are less important than Latin American reference points: the Peruvian thinker José Carlos Mariátegui, source of an original Marxism that was Indo-American in inspiration; the Cuban Revolution - a key turning-point in the history of Latin America; and, finally, the dependency theory - a critique of dependent capitalism - proposed by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, André Gunder Frank, Theotonio dos Santos, and Anibal Quijano (all mentioned on several occasions in Gutierrez's book). (6)

Liberation theologians - and 'liberation Christians' in the broad sense - do not limit themselves to using existing Marxist sources. In the light of their religious culture, but also their social experience, they break new ground and reformulate certain basic themes of Marxism. In this sense, they may be regarded as 'neo-Marxists' - that is to say, as innovators who offer Marxism a new inflection or novel perspectives, or make original contributions to it.

A striking example is their use, alongside the 'classic' terms workers or proletarians, of the concept of *the poor*. Concern for the poor is an ancient tradition of the Church, going back to the evangelical sources of Christianity. The Latin American theologians identify with this tradition, which serves as a constant reference and inspiration. But they are profoundly at odds with the past on a crucial point: for them, the poor are no longer essentially objects of charity, but subjects of their own liberation. Paternalist help or aid gives way to an attitude of solidarity with the struggle of the poor for their self-emancipation. This is where the junction with the truly fundamental principle of Marxism - i.e. that 'the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves' - is effected. This switch is perhaps the most important political innovation, full of implications, made by the liberation theologians with respect to the Church's social teaching. It will also have the greatest consequences in the domain of social *praxis*.

No doubt some Marxists will criticize this way of substituting a vague, emotional and imprecise category ('the poor') for the 'materialist' concept of the proletariat. In reality, the term corresponds to the Latin American situation, where one finds, both in the towns and the countryside, an enormous mass of poor people - the unemployed, the semi-unemployed, seasonal workers, itinerant sellers, the marginalized, prostitutes, and so on - all of them excluded from the 'formal' system of production. The Marxist Christian trade unionists of El Salvador have invented a term, which

combines the components of the oppressed and exploited population: the *pobretariado* ('pooretariat'). It should be stressed that the majority of these poor people - like, moreover, the majority of the members of church base communities - are *women*.

Another distinctive aspect of liberation theology Marxism is a *moral critique of capitalism*. Liberation Christianity, whose inspiration is in the first instance religious and ethical, displays a much more radical, intransigent and categorical anti-capitalism - because charged with moral repulsion - than the continent's communist parties, issued from the Stalinist mould, which believe in the progressive virtues of the industrial bourgeoisie and the 'anti-feudal' historical role of industrial (capitalist) development. An example will suffice to illustrate this paradox. The Brazilian Communist Party explained in the resolutions of its sixth congress (1967) that 'the socialization of the means of production does not correspond to the current level of the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production'. In other words, industrial capitalism must develop the economy and modernize the country before there can be any question of socialism. In 1973 the bishops and senior clergy of the centre-west region of Brazil published a document entitled *The Cry of the Church*, which concluded as follows: '*Capitalism must be overcome. It is the greatest evil, accumulated sin, the rotten root, the tree that produces all the fruits that we know so well: poverty, hunger, illness, death. To this end, private ownership of the means of production (factories, land, trade, banks) must be superseded.*' (7) As we can see with this document - and many more issued from the emancipatory Christian tendency - solidarity with the poor leads to a condemnation of capitalism and therewith to the desire for socialism.

As a result of the ethical radicalism of their anti-capitalism, Christian socialists have often proved more sensitive to the social catastrophes created by 'really existing modernity' in Latin America and by the logic of the 'development of under-development' (to use André Gunder Frank's well-known expression) than many Marxists, enmeshed in a purely economic 'developmentalist' logic. For example, the 'orthodox' Marxist ethnologist Otavio Guilherme Velho has severely criticized the Brazilian progressivist Church for 'regarding capitalism as an absolute evil' and opposing the capitalist transformation of agriculture, which is a vector of progress, in the name of the pre-capitalist traditions and ideologies of the peasantry. (8)

Since the end of the 1970s, another theme has played an increasing role in the Marxist reflection of some Christian thinkers: the elective affinity between *the Biblical struggle against idols and the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism*. The articulation of the two in liberation theology has been facilitated by the fact that Marx himself often use Biblical images and concepts in his critique of capitalism.

Baal, the Golden Calf, Mammon, Moloch - these are some of the 'theological metaphors' of which Marx makes ample use in *Capital* and other economic writings, in order to denounce the spirit of capitalism as an idolatry of money, commodities, profit, the market or capital itself, in a language directly inspired by the Old Testament prophets. The stock exchange is often referred to as the 'Temple of Baal' or 'Mammon'. The most important concept of the Marxist critique of capitalism is itself a 'theological metaphor', referring to idolatry: *fetishism*.

These 'theologico-metaphorical' moments - and other similar ones - in the Marxist critique of capitalism are familiar to several liberation theologians, who do not hesitate to refer to them in their writings. Detailed analysis of such 'metaphors' can be found in Enrique Dussel's 1993 book - a detailed philosophical study of the Marxist theory of fetishism from the standpoint of liberation Christianity. (9)

The critique of the system of economic and social domination in Latin America as a form of idolatry was sketched for the first time in a collection of texts by the Departamento Ecumenico de

Investigaciones (DEI) of San José in Costa Rica, published under the title *The War of Gods: The Idols of Oppression and the Search for the Liberating God*, which had considerable resonance. Published in 1980, it was translated into seven languages. The viewpoint common to the five authors - H. Assmann, F. Hinkelammert, J. Pixley, P. Richard and J. Sobrino - is set out in an introduction. It involves a decisive break with the conservative, retrograde tradition of the Church, which for two centuries presented 'atheism' - of which Marxism was the modern form - as Christianity's arch-enemy:

The key question today in Latin America is not atheism, the ontological problem of the existence of God. ...The key question is idolatry, the adulation of the false gods of the system of domination.... Each system of domination is characterized precisely by the fact that it creates gods and idols who sanctify oppression and hostility to life. ... The search for the true God in this war of gods leads us to a vision of things directed against idolatry, rejecting the false divinities, the fetishes that kill and their religious weapons of death. Faith in the liberating God, the one who unveils his face and secret in the struggle of the poor against oppression, is necessarily fulfilled in the negation of false divinities.... Faith is turning against idolatry. (10)

This problematic was the subject of a profound and innovative analysis in the remarkable co-authored book by Hugo Assmann and Franz Hinkelammert, *Market Idolatry: An Essay on Economics and Theology* (1989). This important contribution is the first in the history of liberation theology explicitly dedicated to the struggle against the capitalist system defined as idolatry. The Church's social teaching had invariably only practiced an ethical critique of 'liberal' (i.e. capitalist) economics. As Assmann stresses, a specifically theological critique is also required - one that reveals capitalism to be a false religion. What does the essence of market idolatry consist in? According to Assmann, the capitalist 'economic religion' manifests itself in the implicit theology of the economic paradigm itself and in everyday fetishistic devotional practice. The explicitly religious concepts to be found in the literature of 'market Christianity' - for example, in the speeches of Ronald Reagan, the writings of neo-conservative religious currents, or the works of 'enterprise theologians' like Michael Novack - do not merely possess a complementary function. Market theology, from Malthus to the latest document from the World Bank, is a ferocious sacrificial theology: it requires the poor to offer up their lives on the altar of economic idols.

For his part, Hinkelammert analyzes the new theology of the American Empire of the 1970s and 1980s, strongly permeated by religious fundamentalism. Its god is nothing other than the 'transcendentalized personification of the laws of the market' and worship of him replaces compassion by sacrifice. The deification of the market creates a god of money, whose sacred motto is inscribed on every dollar bill: In God We Trust. (11)

The research of Costa Rica's DEI has influenced socially engaged Christians and inspired a new generation of liberation theologians. For example, the young Brazilian (Korean in origin) Jung Mo Sung, who in his book *The Idolatry of Capital and the Death of the Poor* (1980), develops a penetrating ethico-religious critique of the international capitalist system, whose institutions - like the IMF or World Bank - condemn millions of poor people in the Third World to sacrifice their lives on the altar of the 'global market' god through the implacable logic of external debt. Obviously, as Sung stresses in his latest book *Theology and Economics* (1994), in contrast to ancient idolatry, we are dealing not with a visible altar, but with a system that demands human sacrifices in the name of seemingly non-religious, profane, 'scientific', 'objective' imperatives.

What do the Marxist critique and the liberation-Christian critique of market idolatry have in common and where do they differ? In my view, we cannot find an atheism in Christianity (contrary to what Ernst Bloch thought), or an implicit theology in Marx, contrary to what is suggested by the brilliant theologian and Marxologist Enrique Dussel. (12) Theological metaphors, like the concept of

'fetishism', are used by Marx as instruments for a scientific analysis, whereas in liberation Christianity they have a properly religious significance. What the two share is a moral ethos, a prophetic revolt, humanist indignation against the idolatry of the market and - even more important - solidarity with its victims.

For Marx, critique of the fetishistic worship of commodities was a critique of capitalist alienation from the standpoint of the proletariat and the exploited - but also revolutionary - classes. For liberation theology, it involves a struggle between the true God of Life and the false idols of death. But both take a stand for living labour against reification; for the life of the poor and the oppressed against the alienated power of dead things. And above all, Marxist non-believers and committed Christians alike wager on the social self-emancipation of the exploited.

Notes

(1) Cf. Löwy 1996.

(2) Cf. Dussel 1982 and Petitdemange 1985.

(3) Gutierrez 1972, p. 244. It is true that since 1984, following the Vatican's criticisms, Gutierrez appears to have retreated to less exposed positions, reducing the relationship to Marxism to an encounter between theology and the social sciences: cf. Gutierrez 1985.

(4) See Dussel 1985, 1990 and 2001.

(5) In the remarkable work that he has devoted to revolutionary Christianity in Latin America, Samuel Silva Gotay lists the following Marxist authors among the references of liberation theology: Goldmann, Garaudy, Schaff, Kolakowski, Lukács, Gramsci, Lombardo-Radice, Luporini, Sanchez Vasquez, Mandel, Fanon, and Monthly Review: see Silva Gotay 1985.

(6) On the use of dependency theory by the liberation theologians, cf. Bordini 1987, chapter 6 and Silva Gotay 1985, pp. 192-7.

(7) Obispos Latinamericanos, 1978, p. 71.

(8) See Velho 1982, pp. 125-6.

(9) See Dussel 1993.

(10) Assmann et al. 1980, p. 9.

(11) Cf. Assmann and Hinkelammert 1989, pp. 105, 254, 321.

(12) Cf. Bloch 1978 and Dussel 1993, p. 153.

References and Bibliography

Assmann, Hugo et al. 1980, *La lucha de los dioses. Los idolos de la opresion y la busqueda del Dios liberador*, San José (Costa Rica): DEI.

Assmann, Hugo and Hinkelammert, Franz 1989, *A Idolatria do Mercado. Ensaio sobre economia e teologia*, San Paulo: Vozes.

Bloch, Ernst 1978, *Atheismus im Christentum: Zur Religion des Exodus und des Reichs*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.

Bordini, Luigi 1985, O marxismo e a teologia da libertação, Rio de Janeiro: Editora Dois Pontos.

Collective 1978, Los Obispos Latinoamericanos entre Medellin y Puebla, San Salvador: Universidad Centroamericana.

Dussel, Enrique 1982, 'Encuentro de cristianos y marxistas en América Latina', Cristianismo y sociedad (Santo Domingo), 74: ?

Dussel, Enrique 1985, La Produccion teórica de Marx. Un comentario a los Grundrisse, Mexico: Siglo XXI.

Dussel, Enrique 1990, El ultimo Marx (1863-1882) y la liberacion latinoamerica, Mexico: Siglo XXI.

Dussel, Enrique 1993, Las metáforas teológicas de Marx, Estella: Verbo Divino.

Dussel, Enrique 2001 (1988), Towards an Unknown Marx: A Commentary on the Manuscripts of 1861-63, trans. Yolanda Angulo, London: Routledge.

Gotay, Samuel Silva 1985, O pensamento cristão revolucionario na América Latina e no Caribe, 1969-73, San Paulo: Edições Paulinas.

Gutierrez, Gustavo 1972, ?

Gutierrez, Gustavo 1985, 'Théologie et sciences sociales', in Théologies de la liberation. Documents et débats, Paris: Éditions du Cerf.

Löwy, Michael 1996 The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America, London and New York: Verso.

Petitdemange, Guy 1985, 'Théologie(s) de liberation et marxisme(s)', in 'Pourquoi la théologie de la libération', supplement to Cahiers de l'actualité religieuse et sociale, 307: ?

Sung, Jung Mo 1989, A idolatria do capital e a morte dos pobres, San Paulo: Edições Paulinas.

Sung, Jung Mo 1995, Teologia e economia, Petropolis: Vozes.

Velho, Otavio Guilherme 1982, Sociedade e agricultura, Rio de Janeiro: Editora Zahar.