

After the End of History

Latin American Liberation Theology in the Wake of Capitalism's Triumph

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Abstract

Postmodernity is best understood as the reflex of yet another mutation of capitalism and as such it is synonymous with what has been lauded as "the end of history" - the unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism. Hence the question of liberation theology and postmodernity is one of opposition and resistance. Yet, as the work of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault suggests, in the era of global capitalism, the ecclesiological innovations introduced by Latin American liberationists have proven insufficiently radical. A more radical ecclesiology, one that avoids the depoliticizing acids of modernity and posits the church as a public in its own right provides a glimpse of what comes after the end of history.

Introduction

[1] Postmodernism is an amorphous concept often endowed with emancipatory force. According to Fredric Jameson, it is best understood not as the cultural dominant of a wholly new social order, but rather as the reflex and concomitant of yet another mutation of capitalism. The fundamental ideological task of the concept "postmodernism," Jameson argues, remains that of coordinating new forms of practice and social and mental habits with the new forms of economic production and organization thrown up by the modification of capitalism in recent years (xii, xiv). This connection between postmodernism and capitalism has been further and fruitfully elaborated upon by others. For example, David Harvey suggests that postmodernism is the cultural form associated with the more flexible modes of capital accumulation and a new phase of space-time compression in the organization of capitalism that have emerged in response to the crisis of the Fordist regime of capitalist accumulation. And Martin Hopenhayn has cogently argued that the cultural characteristics associated with postmodernism are "cofunctional" with current neoliberal economic strategies (93-109).

[2] As such, postmodernity can be understood as a pseudonym for what Francis Fukayama has heralded as the "end of history" - the unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism, the triumph of consumerist Western culture, the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism (3). In other words, postmodernity is the new face of capitalism; it is the visage that "savage capitalism" now assumes. Accordingly, in addressing Latin American liberation theology and postmodernity this paper assumes a distinctly oppositional stance and the question it raises is one of resistance: What are Latin American liberation theology's prospects for funding resistance to capitalism after the end of history that is called postmodernity?

[3] My answer proceeds in three steps. First, I will characterize the liberationists' vision of resistance to capitalism as a distinctly modern one. Second, I will show why this modern vision,

for all of its power in the recent past, is ill-suited to resist capitalism in a postmodern age. Third, I will suggest that some of the base ecclesial communities may be enacting Christianity as a form of resistance to capitalism that is better suited to the “signs of the times,” that holds more promise in a postmodern age.

Liberation Theology and Statecraft

[4] Over the course of the last three decades, Latin American liberationists have manifested an abiding commitment to a revolutionary vision underwritten by a conception of *politics as statecraft*. At the heart of “politics as statecraft” is the characteristically modern understanding that the realm where persons come together in a polity - a politics - is rightly overseen by and finds its highest expression in the state. In other words, the liberationists have consistently embraced the modern notion that the state is the principal instrument of social and political change. The liberationists have consistently hitched the revolution to the state.

[5] This was true in the earliest days of the movement, which were characterized by a heady revolutionary fervor and the expectation that the poor would rise up, shake off the forces of neo-colonialism and dependency, seize the state, and create a new socialist society. And it is true today, as well. In the wake of the collapse of socialism, the liberationists have taken their cue from developments in the political realm and have embraced the concept of civil society. Civil society is seen as a means of democratizing the state, which in turn will humanize the economic order.

[6] Now, before I move on to show why this vision of politics as statecraft is inadequate in a postmodern era, I want to reinforce my claim that the Latin American liberationists are indeed about politics as statecraft by briefly indicating several aspects of their work that reflect such a commitment.

[7] First, the commitment to statecraft is evident in their early embrace of dependency theory, which was thoroughly statist in its orientation - the state was cast as the principal overseer and engine of social change (Lechner: 27; Iguñiz: 41, 47). As the early writings of liberationists such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Hugo Assman, and Leonardo Boff denounced the “development of underdevelopment,” juxtaposed “dependency” and “liberation,” contrasted the enrichment of the “center” with the impoverishment of the “periphery,” and rejected the developmentalist and reformist programs proffered by proponents of “modernization,” the liberationists were consciously adopting the analyses of leading dependency theorists such as André Gunder Frank and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Dussel: 59-60; McGovern; Smith: 147-49). The liberationists’ later qualifications regarding dependency theory (principally involving the recognition of the internal/national dimensions of dependency, see Gutiérrez 1988: xxiv) do not suggest they reject its statist orientation.

[8] Second, the commitment to statecraft is manifest in the liberationists’ inheritance from the New Christendom ecclesiology that nurtured them. The New Christendom ecclesiology that was expounded by Jacques Maritain in works like *Integral Humanism* and *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, both immensely influential in Latin America, was thoroughly statist in its orientation. The famous “distinction of planes” underwritten by this ecclesiology awarded the

state sovereignty over the political realm. Although the liberationists rejected key elements of the New Christendom ecclesiology when they opted for the church of the poor (specifically, they took issue with New Christendom's understanding of the relation of nature and grace and its slide into reformist and developmentalist politics; see Gutiérrez 1983: 40, 47, 188; 1988: 36-39, 45), they did not reject its statist conception of politics. The church of the poor is not directly political; politics remains the realm and responsibility of the state. For this reason, Gutiérrez cautions against any "politico-religious messianism" that would deduce concrete social or political plans from the Christian faith (1983: 69; 1988: 138; 1990: 64-66) and Pablo Richard notes that the church of the poor seeks to be genuinely apolitical (1987: 172).

[9] Third, the commitment to statecraft is implicitly manifest in the "narrative of freedom" that underwrites much liberationist thought (Gutiérrez 1977; 1988: 17-22; García 1987: 20-29; Sobrino 1984: 7-38). The liberationists tell the story of the temporal realm's slow struggle to escape direct ecclesiastical supervision. In the course of doing so, they celebrate such things as the modern differentiation of life into autonomous spheres like "religion" and "the political," the advance of secularization, and the withdrawal of the church from politics. And as we all know, the space of freedom created by the church's evacuation of the political realm was filled by the state.¹

[10] Fourth, statecraft underwrites their conception of civil society. The experience of living under the heel of repressive states in the 1960s and 1970s prompted liberationists to reevaluate their revolutionary vision, and democratic processes in particular. With the arrival of the "end of history" and collapse of socialism, this questioning of their political vision reached the point of crisis. As a result, liberationists began to speak of a collapse of hope that rendered the current situation worse than it was at the outset of the conquest (Richard 1994: 92, 96; 1996: 9-10) or even of "capitalism without alternatives" (Hinkelammert: 11).

[11] By the early 1990s, however, the liberationists were finding their political center in the rise of popular protagonism, in the increased presence and voice of the popular sectors in society, and they have identified this with the emergence of civil society in Latin America.

[12] Helio Gallardo suggests that there are at least three different models of civil society currently circulating in Latin America (Gallardo 1995). One model, that of neoliberalism, identifies civil society with the free market and places it over against the state. A second model associates civil society with the emergence of popular groups that will unite in a revolutionary front, seize the state, and establish a socialist order. Gallardo rightly notes that this model amounts to little more than unreconstructed, discredited, traditional leftist politics. The third model casts civil society as a tributary of political society or the state. According to this model, civil society constitutes the realm of citizenship in which popular social movements participate in order to influence and inform politics and the state. Latin American liberationists are best identified with this third

¹ Note that this narrative of freedom is not told in an uncritical manner. The liberationists are critical of modernity. However, they are critical of its "incompletion," its failure to recognize and enforce social-economic rights in addition to political rights. There is nothing to suggest that the liberationists reject modernity's conception of politics.

model. They cast civil society as the means whereby the state can be democratized - opened up, made responsive and accountable to the poor majorities - and subsequently directed to defend the life of the marginalized and oppressed (see Richard 1994: 100). Thus, in stark contrast with neoliberal theories that advocate a minimalist state, liberationists' vision of civil society maintains a central role for the state. It remains a vision of politics as statecraft.

Capitalism, the State and Civil Society

[13] It makes little sense to deny or denigrate the profound contribution that the liberationists' have made to the contemporary understanding and practice of the Christian faith. Nevertheless, as the "signs of the times" take on a postmodern hue, the effectiveness of their vision is limited insofar as it continues to operate within the parameters of modernity, that is to say, insofar as they remain committed to politics as statecraft.

[14] What is wrong with politics as statecraft? What renders this modern vision suspect in a postmodern age? To make the case against the liberationists' embrace of statecraft, I draw on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault. The work of these two figures can be understood as complementary efforts to revision revolutionary politics in the wake of the failed revolution of 1968 in France. Specifically, both Deleuze and Foucault were critical of the revolutionaries of their day for (among other things) a commitment to politics as statecraft.

[15] The heart of Deleuze's critique of statecraft is that capitalism in its current phase has co-opted the state and reduced it to an arm and instrument of market forces. Capitalism today has the character of an "international ecumenical organization" that eludes the control of states. Capitalism, Deleuze writes, is "an independent, worldwide axiomatic that is like a single City, a megapolis . . . of which the States are parts or neighborhoods" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 434-35).² In this setting, instead of functioning as supervisory or controlling bodies, states operate as models of realization for capitalism. "Never before," writes Deleuze, "has a State lost so much of its power in order to enter with so much force into the service of the signs of economic power" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 252). Far from constraining capitalism, states now serve capitalism by organizing the basis of production (resources, wealth, population, industrial capacity, etc.) and preparing it for insertion into the worldwide capitalist order and by crushing resistance to that order. This holds true for all states. Capitalism in its current phase is capable of effecting surplus value from a diversity of state forms, be they democratic, totalitarian, or even socialist. Therefore, any revolution that is directed towards the seizure of state power will only find itself, even if successful, incorporated into the logic and subject to the discipline of the international capitalist order. The state may have offered protection from capitalism during modernity, but not any more. Not under the sign of postmodernity.

[16] Capitalism's incorporation of the state, however, does not exhaust the deficiencies of politics as statecraft. Here Foucault's work proves helpful. Towards the end of his life, Foucault turned his attention to the ways in which dominion is extended by means much more insidious

² In this paper I refer to two works in which Deleuze collaborated with Félix Guattari. I do not attempt the futile task of sorting out the voices; instead I will simply refer to the texts as being Deleuze's.

than the state and its disciplinary technologies. In the last few years of his life, he wrote of “governmentality,” which was his name for the way in which dominion is exercised not just through the operations of the state, but also by means of a vast array of technologies that are encouraged and implemented in the social, cultural, religious, and private realms of life. In other words, Foucault’s analysis suggests that capitalism is not simply an economic or political formation that can be fought with the state. It is, for example, a cultural formation as well. Capitalism extends its dominion by propagating certain cultural forms. This is to say, capitalism is produced and reproduced in the very way we think and feel and see and play, and not just in the ways we work and buy and sell. Hence, hitching the revolution to the state predisposes the revolution to failure not only because capitalism has overrun the state, but also because such a focus neglects the ways capitalism advances, and hence must be resisted across every dimension of life.

[17] Foucault’s notion of governmentality also sheds more light on why the liberationists’ hope in civil society is ultimately misplaced. As it has unfolded in modern practice (as opposed, perhaps, to modern rhetoric), civil society is not a space of “freedom” that stands over against government, guiding and constraining it. Rather, civil society demarcates a mode of government. It designates that part of the social field where, in the name of efficiency, government is the responsibility of apparatuses other than the state.³ In other words, civil society remains a disciplinary space. In the current capitalist context, it is a means of directing or channeling desire towards proper capitalist ends, and what passes for “participation” and “influence” on the governing powers (namely “representative democracy”) amounts to little more than the expression of desires and preferences in accord with market options.

The Uncivil Struggle of the Church of the Poor

[18] The Latin American liberationists would have us believe that the state can be the ally of those who struggle against the capitalist order and that civil society is the means by which the state can be guided in that struggle. Such illusions, however, are dispelled under the force of Deleuze and Foucault’s analyses. The modern politics of statecraft is futile in the face of a postmodern capitalism. Both the state and civil society are unmasked as servants of the capitalist order. Therefore, as the Latin American liberationists continue to give voice to the voiceless they would do well to shed their distinctly modern conception of resistance in favor of a form of resistance that is both necessitated by and (ironically) made possible by the advent of postmodernity. I will close with several suggestions concerning what this might look like.

[19] First, it has been argued that postmodernity is also “post-secular” in the sense that the boundaries modernity carefully erected between the religious and the social/political are crumbling. It seems that postmodernity has, perhaps inadvertently, created an opening for the sacred. Liberationists ought to take advantage of this opening. Specifically, they ought to collapse the distinction between the theological and the social, between religion and politics. If it is to provide shelter from the depredations of capitalism, Christianity must escape the apolitical

³ Foucault points in particular to the various privately led campaigns of moralization/normalization associated with health, education, philanthropy, and religion.

prison cell constructed for it by modernity. Liberationists need to recast Christianity, not as the apolitical custodian of abstract values, but rather as a social, political, economic formation vying with other formations on a single field of lived experience.⁴ In other words, in the wake of capitalism's triumph, the liberationists need to bury the ghost of New Christendom that haunts their work and instead encourage the church to recognize itself as a fully material (social, political, economic) reality that can *directly* challenge capitalism and its state.

[20] Second, such an ecclesiological reconstruction, however, will not simply encourage the church to enter the social-political-economic realm as one participant alongside so many others on the illusory landscape of freedom called civil society. Rather, it will envision the church as an "uncivil society," as a society that does not heed the siren call of state-power, as a society that refuses the invitation to be just another interest group in civil society. A society that discerns in such an invitation and such calls surreptitious means of disciplining the church, rendering the intrinsically political and economic nature of its doctrinal and liturgical practices innocuous, incorporating it into the capitalist order.

[21] As an "uncivil society," the church is, in Reinhard Hütter's words, "a public in its own right" (336). If, as some have suggested (Wannenwetsch: 279), Christian worship is the corporate joining into the politics of God, then the church's politics does not culminate in the state and its civil society but in the Kingdom of God. The politics of the Kingdom, in turn, amounts to nothing less than participation in the divine life of the Trinity - a life that Leonardo Boff characterizes as a dynamic, decentralized dance (1988: 118-19, 196). In other words, the church embodies a decentralized, participatory politics that defies the discipline of the state and its civil society.

[22] My third and final suggestion is that the liberationists need look no further than the base ecclesial communities for examples of the sort of ecclesiological reconstruction that may fund resistance to capitalism. There is evidence that some of these communities are avowedly anticapitalist while avoiding politics as statecraft.⁵ It appears that some of the base communities are, in the words of Leonardo Boff, "reinventing the church," generating a new practice of faith that neither heeds the modern boundaries between religion and politics nor succumbs to the allure of the state (1986; cf. Ribeiro de Oliveira). As poor Christians come together in nonhierarchical, participatory gatherings to celebrate informal liturgies, as they reflect on Scripture, as they share food, visit the sick, establish a cooperative or undertake a joint work project, and occasionally engage in some form of protest or petition the ruling powers, they are clearly about politics. They are engaged in a struggle with the dominant order that is fought on all fronts of life. Indeed,

⁴ Note, however, that Christian theological convictions may preclude the assertion that Christianity is *just* one social formation among others, or even that it is a social formation *like* other social formations in anything other than an analogous way. See for example, Hütter.

⁵ At this point perhaps a word is in order about the anti-statist politics advocated in this essay. The antistatist position I advocate is to be distinguished from the neoliberal economists and their disciples insofar as whereas they profess to be antistatist, in fact they only oppose a certain kind of (welfare) state. Rhetoric aside, they actually embrace a state that is long on disciplinary power (military/police) and short on welfare. Furthermore, the antistatist position I put forward only leaves one naked before the forces of the market if the Spirit is not forming alternative communities capable of resisting.

any doubt that these communities embody a political alternative to the state vanishes as we recall the uncooperative and sometimes brutal response of the state to these activities.

[23] One reason that the state rightly recognizes these communities as a threat is that many among the base communities are forsaking the politics circumscribed by the state and civil society, by interest group and party (Berryman; Cavanaugh: 78-80). Among some base communities there is a growing sense of the futility of relying on the state to insure “capitalist development for all” (Gallardo 1994: 21) or “capitalism with a human face” (Tamayo: 78). There is a growing awareness that the democratic processes of civil society can be manipulated for very undemocratic ends. This refusal of the secular order’s politics, however, may not be a symptom of apathy and resignation. Rather, it may be an instantiation of God’s politics. As base community members move from worship, where they reflect on Genesis’ account of God’s creation of the land for the use of all, to the occupation of vacant land, they display the church as a public in its own right. As they defy the state’s order and the state’s arms to gather to sing and pray and read Scripture, they display the Body of Christ as a distinctive polity or politics. As they circumvent party figures and institutional hurdles and directly confront the state with claims, they present the state with the reality of a different public, a different politics, God’s politics. As the state and civil society increasingly reveal their true nature as vassals of the capitalist order, the spread of these communities may well herald the emergence of a politics capable of resisting capitalism after the end of history.

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