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Liberation Theology Today: Tasks of Criticism in Interpellation to the Present World

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Abstract: Latin American liberation theology appears to be an obsolete phenomenon that is unable to speak about the realities of today's world. Since the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published two instructions on liberation theology, the Vatican has been considered to have condemned it. Likewise, the Vatican of John Paul II and Benedict XVI focused on the reprobation of several liberation theologians attempting to silence their voices. However, liberation theology aimed at the realisation of justice in a world in which the injustice that gave birth to this phenomenon still prevails in new ways. This article establishes a relationship between liberation theology and critical thinking to offer an alternative to the future of liberation theology. We insist that, despite the end of the era in which both were born, they continue to challenge the present world. Using Adornian optics, we establish how critical thought constitutes a prophetic denunciation. Thus, liberation theology will be understood within this critical tradition and how it critiques the current reality, in which the logic of late capitalism prevails. Afterwards, the contemporary world will be studied from this point of view to try to discover the pending tasks of criticism. It is the question of discovering the tasks of critiques to challenge the present.

Keywords: liberation theology; post-Marxism; Adorno; neoliberalism; Latin America; Catholicism



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1. Introduction

Latin American liberation theology¹ experienced a period of victories and flourishing since the II General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, which met in Medellín in 1968. However, today, it appears to be a phenomenon of the past. This article philosophically analyses the tasks in the present for the future of the theology of liberation.

Liberation will be understood as a social movement (Smith 1991) equipped with a theory that directs its action towards the present. It is none other but understanding liberation theology as the reflection on the praxis of liberation, as self-conceived by liberation theologians (Gutiérrez 1972; Geffré and Gutiérrez 1974; L. Boff and Boff 1985).

Special attention will be paid to the main works on liberation theology's future: *The Future of Liberation Theology* (Petrella 2004) and *Liberation Theology after the End of History* (Bell 2001), which supposes two opposing proposals, as well as more contemporary works to be used for their criticism (Althaus-Reid 2004, 2007; Sung 2007, 2011, 2015, 2018a, 2018b). In reading these works, the choice is made to establish an alternative reading that, while attending to and borrowing certain analyses from these works, opts for a different proposal that involves attention to the Adornian perspective and the need to rehabilitate theory (Adorno 2007, p. 1).

The proposal involves a first section in which the choice is made to understand the theology of liberation within the tradition of critical theory. To achieve this objective, an approach is made to the question of the role of knowledge and theory in liberation theology and critical theory (Gordon 1996; Lamola 2018; Horkheimer 2000; Dussel 2014a, 2014b), as well as to tracing their influences on the theology of liberation (Lamola 2018; Coelho 2022;

Löwy 1996, 2008; Ellacuría and Sobrino 1994a, 1994b; Comblin et al. 1993; Dussel 2017b; Neut Aguayo and Soto Pimentel 2014).

After that, in the second part, the paper tries to understand the present world, for which it is necessary to carry out an analysis of the defeat of liberation theology from a historical perspective (Smith 1991; Lernoux 1982, 1990; Berryman 1984, 1987; Cousineau 2022; Comblin 1993; Dussel 1979; López Trujillo 1980; Hinkelammert 1995, 2021) and a socio-philosophical one (Fukuyama 2006; Hinkelammert 1995, 2018, 2021; Bell 2001; Mendoza-Álvarez 2016; Bingemer and Susín 2016; Adorno 2007; Harvey 1989, 2019; Gouzoulis 2023; Mau 2023; CEPAL 2022), which are mutually interpellated by each other.

The third section of this paper is its propositional part. For this purpose, a brief analysis of the present world is carried out, taking into account both the economic and cultural aspects of postmodern reality from the Marxist critical tradition and the critical elements of liberation theology (Adorno 2007, 2008, 2012, 2017; Reed 2020; Jameson 2007; Heinrich 2012; Mau 2023; Hinkelammert 2021; Maiso 2022; Bobka and Braunstein 2022; Schumpeter 2008; Horkheimer and Adorno 2007; Gordon 1996; Sobrino 1991; Dussel 2021; CELAM 2007; Gouzoulis 2023; CEPAL 2022).

In this way, a critical methodology for the present is developed, following the perspective from which critical theory and liberation theology seek to understand reality from the perspective of the victims. This perspective challenges the appearance of reality as a harmonious totality. Likewise, a critique of the critique itself is carried out, trying to discover the points through which it can be developed in a different world than the one from which it arose.

The results are focused on Adorno's philosophy, attempting to revive a radical critique of the present while retaining the progress of the past and refusing to succumb to the triumph of capitalism. The task for the present and future of liberation theology is, therefore, to reconstruct a theory capable of providing answers to the antinomies of the present.

2. Why Understand Liberation Theology as a Critical Theory?

Latin liberation theology can be presented as a critical thought. This theology draws its influence from Western philosophy (Lamola 2018), especially from a Marxist analysis. This is why da Silva Coelho argues that "with regards to its relationship with Critical Theory, it can be said that Liberation Theology in Latin America occupies a place in what we could call critical thought" (Coelho 2022).

The use that liberation theology makes of the work of Marx and Marxism is widely known (Dussel 2017b; Löwy 2008; Lamola 2018). However, this approach to Marxism has always been critical, far from dogmatism. It has chosen to use the tools at its disposal for analysing reality: "what attracts them is rather 'Western Marxism'" (Löwy 2008, p. 227).

Names such as Marcuse, Horkheimer, Gramsci, and Walter Benjamin can be traced and found in the main works of liberation theology (Gutiérrez 1972; C. Boff 1980; Gutiérrez 1988; Löwy 1996; Ellacuría and Sobrino 1994a, 1994b; Comblin et al. 1993; Neut Aguayo and Soto Pimentel 2014; Dussel 2017a). Other unorthodox Marxists such as the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui can also be found in them (Gutiérrez 1972; Löwy 1996).

Placing liberation theology in the tradition of critical theory is not, therefore, far-fetched. On the contrary, it allows us to point out its influence and expand critical theory beyond the academic limits of the so-called Frankfurt School and Marxian work.

This does not mean that liberation theology is simply a repetition of critical theory. In contrast, liberation theology constitutes thought that borrows from multiple influences (Coelho 2022).

This original thought can be located within the tradition of critical theory, not because of the content itself, but rather due to the way that a critical reflection on reality is carried out and the practical-transformative sense that is given to it.

If we can speak of liberation theology as a critical theory, it is not because of its specific content, but because of the method developed and the understanding of the role of theory in transformative praxis.

Liberation theology is a particularly vivid example of how the purpose and the reflexive structure of critical theory operate. Recall that critical theory intentionally and self-consciously reflects on the particular situation in which it is rooted, in order actively to respond to that situation. (Gordon 1996, p. 98)

Liberation theology is a critical theory insofar as it understands that a radical critique of reality is necessary for social transformation. To do so, it is necessary to critique the negativity of reality (Adorno 2007, 2008), that is, from the suffering subject.

A theory is not constructed from an abstract place, as modern science pretends, but from a position in the world (Petrella 2004, p. 84). Building a theory involves taking a side. It is a political decision that constructs a place from which to interpret and interact with the world (Horkheimer 2000; Dussel 2014a, 2014b).

Critical theory and liberation theology consider that those subjects who are victims of the process of social reproduction occupy a place that is considered a non-place (Ellacuría 1991, 1:117). For liberation theology, this non-place refers to the “place of the cross” (Ellacuría 1991, 1:120–21) that the poor, the victims of the social and economic system, occupy. In this sense, liberation theology places the poor in the place that critical theory gives to the victims of society. In this sense, liberation theology argues that God is not neutrally observing reality, but takes sides with the poor and disadvantaged, and that Jesus Christ occupies this place of God on the cross, dying for them (Gutiérrez 1972).

It entails comprehending and scrutinising the world as part of a social transformation process. It recognises that transformative praxis is inconceivable and, above all, unfruitful without radical and immanent critique. Liberation theology can be understood as a critical theory to the extent that it understands itself as a reflection on and from the praxis of liberation (Gutiérrez 1972; Assmann 1976; L. Boff and Boff 1985), taking a side in reality.

3. Two Processes of Defeat

The concept of defeat discussed in this article is twofold.

On the one hand, it refers to sociohistorical defeat. Liberation theology loses institutional and social importance in a battle against its adversaries and counterparts.

On the other hand, it refers to defeat in the realm of social ontology, which occurs simultaneously with and as a result of the sociohistorical process. This is the ontological victory of capital (Bell 2001, p. 34). It is not an exclusive defeat of liberation theology, but of emancipatory thought in general. It points out the inability to build utopian projects that go beyond capitalism (Traverso 2021).

With this ontological victory of capital, the immanent laws of capital are further entrenched, elevating the commodity category to its highest power. Now, “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Fisher 2009, p. 1). It is a defeat that not only affects liberation theology but also all critical and transformative thinking.

However, in the face of capitalism’s victory, critical thinking must seek in the contradictions—accentuated by the process itself—the way to turn criticism back into practice, to interpret the world for its transformation (Adorno 2007, p. 3), so that new forms of resistance to capital can arise.

It is this second defeat that will be the focus of the analysis, trying, nevertheless, to connect it to the present historical situation, as it is a form of defeat that is continuously reproduced.

Both forms of defeat involve each other, so the solution proposed will not simply come from the realm of theory, but from history. This proposal relies on the praxical capacity of theory, hence the use of Adorno, to transform the context in which it is carried out.

3.1. The Historical Process of Defeat

The historical defeat of liberation theology was not an isolated event. It is not a moment when liberation theology disappears. Instead, it is a process that we can identify in the decade from Puebla (1979) to the assassination of UCA martyrs (1989). Several significant

events happened during that decade, both within the Church and outside society, that we can highlight when we talk about its apparent defeat.

It is important to point out that the process of the historical defeat of liberation theology coincides with a universal historical process of the defeat of emancipatory thought in general (Trigo 2005, p. 45). This process could be marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the “end of history” (Fukuyama 2006). It coincides with a historical defeat of the alternative to capitalism (Hinkelammert 1995, pp. 25–37; Hinkelammert 2021, pp. 211–41). This is what makes it possible to speak of a defeat at the level of social ontology.

After the Medellín conference (1968), liberation theology enjoyed a four-year institutional “honeymoon” period, in which liberationists conquered the main positions in CELAM (Smith 1991, pp. 165–88) and it was accepted as the official theology (CELAM 2018). Reaction, however, began to organise itself around the Sucre assembly (1972), a counter-offensive at the following Puebla conference.

In Sucre, Alfonso López Trujillo was elected Secretary General of CELAM. Trujillo was an opponent of liberation theology and led the Church’s positional turn to eliminate all subversive aspects (López Trujillo 1980): “The strategy, then, was not to oppose and condemn overtly the idea of liberation, but to reshape the meaning of liberation according to their view, and to subordinate it to the work of evangelization” (Smith 1991, p. 210)².

Trujillo made sure to prevent the presence of liberationist representatives at the Puebla conference (Berryman 1987, pp. 103–4). Many of them were, however, involved as advisors and assistants to the more progressive bishops (Dussel 1979; Smith 1991, p. 212). This was fundamental to the outcome of the conference (Smith 1991, p. 220).

Puebla did not turn out as Trujillo had hoped. Nor was it a victory for liberation theology (Cousineau 2022, pp. 3–4). The battle centred, then, on the interpretation of the documents produced and the positional play that each one managed to take in the decade that followed (Comblin 1993; Smith 1991, pp. 209–21; CELAM 1979). While liberation theology saw Puebla as a continuation of Medellín, conservatives saw the conference as a correction of their imperfections (López Trujillo 1980; Berryman 1987; Lernoux 1982, 1990; Smith 1991).

In 1978, Karol Wojtyła was elected to the pontificate as John Paul II. His election entailed the appointment of Cardinal Ratzinger as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This fact, in addition to boosting conservative positions on the road to Puebla and an institutional offensive against liberation, led to the publication of the two instructions on liberation theology in 1984 and 1986 (Ratzinger 1986; Lernoux 1990, pp. 89–104; Turner 2007). The publication of the *Rapporto sulla fede*, an interview with Cardinal Ratzinger outlining his theological ideas and Church project, also suggests a regression from the progress made during Vatican II. In addition, it presents a clear opposition to liberation theology (Ratzinger and Messori 1985).

These instructions were understood as a condemnation and were accompanied by the silencing and/or condemnation of several theologians, such as Leonardo Boff (Smith 1991, p. 225; Lernoux 1990, pp. 85–88), or John Paul II’s quarrel with Ernesto Cardenal during the pontiff’s visit to Sandinista Nicaragua and the subsequent condemnation of the Nicaraguan theologian (Lernoux 1990, p. 60).

Moreover, these condemnations were accompanied by an institutional replacement in the Latin American Church (Cousineau 2003, pp. 350–52; Trigo 2005, p. 46). With the accession of John Paul II to the pontificate, positions of responsibility changed hands. The Church stopped supporting the progressive bishops and, taking advantage of their resignations due to age, replaced them with conservative ones (Lernoux 1990, pp. 79–115).

During the same period, two transcendental events occurred that are significant for the symbolic acts they represent. These events marked the opening and closing of the 1980s and signalled the beginning and end of the process of defeat. These two violent events refer to the assassination of Óscar Arnulfo Romero in 1980 and the assassination of the martyrs of the UCA in 1989.

These murders are not one-off events but are part of a process of political violence from the very beginning of the liberation movement (Table 1). Repression against the Church became commonplace in the liberation theology movement (Berryman 1984; Lernoux 1990). Social and political action against national security dictatorships and the denunciation of injustice made the most socially minded religious people a target of professional armies (Lernoux 1982, pp. 15–60).

Table 1. Documented repression against the Catholic Church (1964–1978) ¹.

	Threatened/ Defamed	Arrested	Tortured	Killed	Kidnapped/ Disappeared	Exiled/ Expelled
Bishops	60	35	2	2	2	3
Priests	118	485	46	41	11	253
Religious	18	44	7	3	3	26
Laity	12	371	18	33	21	6
TOTAL	208	935	73	79	37	288

¹ Extract from (Lernoux 1982, p. 466).

After the process encompassed by these assassinations, liberation theology entered a new epoch. This is the moment when we can begin to speak of defeat. Its influence began to wane, and it ceased to occupy the main front pages of the media.

Similarly, military attacks on liberation theology and its movement were supported by US aid. Reagan’s fight against the communist threat led to US intervention in various forms: economic and military aid and CIA involvement in Latin America (Lernoux 1982, 1990; Smith 1991; Cousineau 2022).

3.2. *The Disappearance of the Alternative and the Socio-Ontological Defeat*

This section will briefly describe the resulting social ontology. The aim is to understand the constitution of the reality resulting from the victory of capitalism, a victory that, although it maintains the existence of inequality, seems to have caused the capacity for resistance and the socio-political response to vanish.

In the attentive reading of the sign of the times (Second Vatican Council 1965), Catholic pastoral work had been able to find a place in which to deploy the social doctrine of the Church (Scannone 2019a, p. 88). At this point, the emancipatory horizon was within civil society’s possibilities for action. The idea of a transformative praxis appeared as one of the possible social imaginaries (Taylor 2004) of civil society:

Under conditions of ontological insecurity (. . .) [i]n the face of an expanding revolutionary crisis, the conventional uses of Christianity were made irrelevant, opening Catholicism itself to being adapted in ways that allowed actors to strategically contend with an increasingly hostile political climate. (Reed 2017, p. 1)

In the period before the defeat, Latin American Catholicism had been able to ally itself with existing emancipatory movements. Emancipation constituted a viable alternative to capitalism. Whereas in the 1970s, Catholics had come close to revolution, with the change in social imaginaries, this is now impossible (Reed 2020, p. 154).

Historical defeat coincides with a transformation of reality in which the conditions that allowed its emergence have disappeared (Scannone 2019b, pp. 3–6), thus resulting in the disappearance of not only the political opportunity but also the factors of subjective will and consciousness capable of carrying out a praxis of liberation (Smith 1991, pp. 58–64).

This disappearance of context is not only historical but also accompanied by a transformation in social reproduction itself, sharpening capitalism’s grip on the world (Mendoza-Álvarez 2016, pp. 274–76).

Thus, the alternatives to the existing reality disappeared, and the end of history (Fukuyama 2006) was imposed, naturalising capitalism as the ultimate reality: “the awareness that there is an alternative is lost. It seems that there are no alternatives anymore, and the Everything, the form in which the First World presents itself, is the expression of this

state of consciousness" (Hinkelammert 1995, p. 28). Utopia and emancipation now appear as impossibilities (Hinkelammert 1995, pp. 157–210), as thoughts that escape assimilation and therefore the security of the system: "the failed 21st-century socialist dictatorships have solidified a rejection to anything that speaks about emancipation, social justice, oppression and so on" (Aguilar Ramírez and De Beer 2020, p. 1).

At this historic moment of defeat, a transformation of the world's political economy was taking place (Scannone 2009, p. 64), from a Keynesian paradigm to a neoliberal one under the Thatcher and Reagan governments (Harvey 1989; Gray 2009). It was then that there was a victory of capitalism as a totality: "Neoliberal economics presents capitalism as an inevitably historical reality and proclaims its definitive triumph" (Bingemer and Susin 2016, p. 19).

The historical situation of the defeat of the alternative implies that the inherent laws of capital are no longer subject to restrictions (Hinkelammert 1995, p. 41). They can expand globally without resistance. They cover not only the entire geographic sphere (Harvey 2019) but also the sphere of social relations beyond the sphere of work. The rules of production expand and conquer all social relations of modern life (Horkheimer and Adorno 2007, pp. 94–136). There is such a dominance of capital that, as Daniel M. Bell argues, it "is not merely an economic affair (. . .) but is ontological" (Bell 2001, pp. 12–13). Then, "reified consciousness has become total" (Adorno 2007, p. 346).

The essence of capitalism studied by Marx has crossed all the limits of classical production, expanding into the whole of life (Dussel 2017b). There is no longer an individual sphere abstracted from the laws of capitalism:

Capitalism has enveloped society, absorbing all the conditions of production and reproduction. It is as if the walls of the factory had come crumbling down and the logics that previously functioned in that enclosure had been generalized across the entire time-space continuum. (Bell 2001, p. 31)

With the "transformation of world capitalism, which came to light at the most dramatic moment of the crisis of socialism, i.e., with the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989" (Hinkelammert 1995, p. 25), not only capitalism is transformed but, above all, the socio-ontological conditions of reality: "The culture of the advanced capitalist societies, has undergone a profound shift in the structure of feeling" (Harvey 1989, p. 39).

The victory of capitalism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses many aspects of life, requiring constant adaptation on the part of the individuals and societies that experience it. It is not a dictatorial victory in the sense of fascism, but the total and universal expansion of immanent, all-embracing laws: of the process of capitalist reproduction, which reproduces the laws and social relations of production in all spheres of society (Horkheimer and Adorno 2007).

Nowadays, although the socio-economic situation has not significantly improved for the masses in Latin America—since the beginning of the 21st century, extreme poverty has remained and even increased (Figure 1)—the transformative possibility has disappeared from the realm of possibilities. The ontological victory of capital has changed the previous sociohistorical context, disciplining the very desire of the subjects (Bell 2001), that is, transforming the very social constitution of the subjects subjected to the power of capital (Mau 2023, pp. 70–88).

In conclusion, it can be said that the defeat to which liberation theology is being subjected is contextual. The political context in which it could have been generated has disappeared, but the sociohistorical context has been maintained and even expanded with the emergence of new excluded subjectivities, namely, those who were "indecent" (Althaus-Reid 2004, 2010), the marginalised that the purely economic category of the poor used by early liberation theologians did not include (Althaus-Reid 2007).

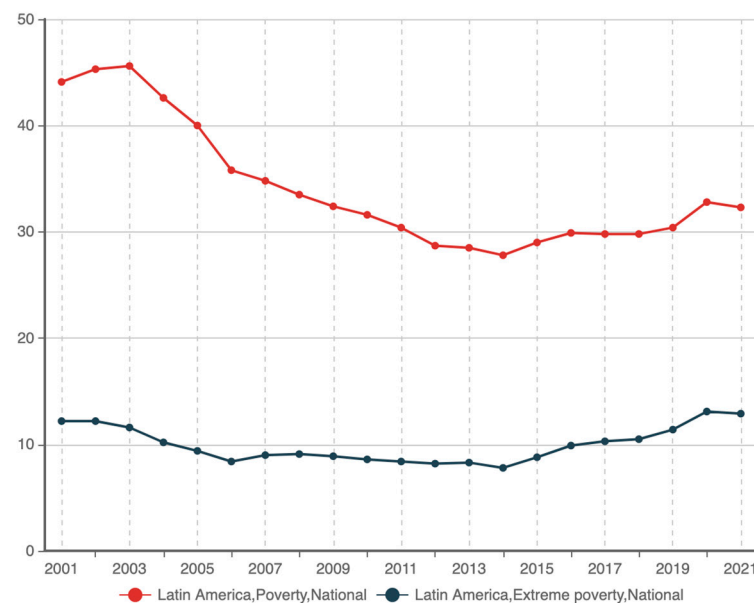


Figure 1. Population living in extreme poverty and poverty by geographical area, 2001–2021. Source: (CEPAL 2022).

It is therefore a political defeat, a defeat of social praxis, in which liberation theology is no longer able to offer satisfactory answers to the new reality. The rebirth of this theology can only be linked to the reappearance of a determined sociohistorical context that allows its development, for which the theory must be prepared. The recovery of this context is, in the first instance, a task for theory.

4. Present and Future of Liberation Theology

Concerning the future of liberation theology, there are several works to be taken into account. This article will focus on the works of Ivan Petrella (2004) and Daniel M. Bell (2001). Each of the authors represents a different and, to some extent, contrarian approach.

Although Bell and Petrella made some important arguments, their proposals fail, as they do not sufficiently consider the critique of reality. They are also unable to address the multiple faces of poverty that will be shown in the next section, as they do not take theory seriously, that is, in its unity within praxis, which the Adornian perspective makes possible, as it understands categories and concepts as material realities that constitute the damaged life (Adorno 2007, 2008, 2020; Maiso 2022). In the critique of those two works, Marcella Althaus-Reid (2004, 2007) and Jung Mo Sung (2007, 2011, 2018a, 2018b) will be reviewed.

Petrella argues that with the historical process of defeat, the historical project on which liberation theology was based disappeared. Having been incorporated—critically—into the socialist context, liberation theology would be unable to continue its transformative action in the present, losing the transformative potential of its theory in mere emptiness (Petrella 2004, pp. 8–10).

To remain relevant, liberation theology will have to put at its centre the construction of a new historical project adapted to the present reality. For Petrella, capitalism today has generated numerous versions of itself. This should imply a reduction in liberation theology's criticisms of capitalism since some versions of capitalism with a friendly face have now emerged (Petrella 2004, pp. 69–85). Likewise, Petrella's proposal does not set out how this "historical project" should be constructed but rather waits for it to emerge.

Daniel M. Bell's book examines how liberation theology can be relevant in a post-communist and postmodern world from his Radical Orthodoxy position. Bell argues that the ontological victory of capitalism has brought about the end of history (Fukuyama 2006), creating a reality that makes effective action in the secular world difficult. Faced with this situation, Bell suggests an alternative that involves looking to the Church. In his opinion,

liberation could only be achieved from within the Church, detached from the secular world. For Bell, the future of liberation theology consists in the refusal to stop suffering as an act of hope (Bell 2001, pp. 190–95), taking refuge in the interiority of the Church.

However, interaction with the secular world has been a fundamental element of Catholic doctrine and pastoral care since Vatican II (Second Vatican Council 1965): “the Council insisted on a third truth, the autonomy of the world, which is one of its most original and theologically revolutionary contributions” (Bingemer and Susín 2016, p. 32).

Bell’s proposal would mean, for Catholicism, a regression to pre-conciliar positions: the abandonment of the world by the Church and a radical separation between the two. It is difficult to understand how the Church could seek liberation if it does not interact with the secular world (Second Vatican Council 1965; Scannone 2019a; Bingemer and Susín 2016, pp. 31–32).

While both approaches are interesting and need to be considered, they both fail—in their own ways—in the need to approach reality as it is, in its plurality, as both are set in a different context from the current one—as the liberation theologians did.

On the one hand, Petrella paid no attention to the subjects of liberation theology, as Althaus-Reid would do with her “indecent theology” (Althaus-Reid 2004, 2010). These are the subjects who are located outside society, but whose existence is necessary for social reproduction (Mau 2023, pp. 152–73). Bell, on the other hand, while accepting the postmodern world, understands liberation in its purely spiritual sense, which leads him to the *refusal to end suffering* as a theological way to salvation.

The approach presented here proposes an integration of liberation theology with the tradition of critical theory, paying particular attention to the work of Adorno. It understands the need to evolve thinking and avoid idolatry, while maintaining the goal of emancipation, without renouncing the use of social sciences and Marxism. The aim is to return to praxis from theory, to recompose the thought of liberation against a blind praxis, the *pseudopraxis* (Adorno 2007, 2008, 2017). To achieve this, it will be necessary to carry out a self-criticism of the theory itself to discover the subjects that have been forgotten and that, by their mere existence, question reality itself.

4.1. *Signs of the Times: New Subjects, Same Struggles*

[The] connection between Christianity and progressive politics is not new, although it is often misrecognized [. . .]. The potential of this connection, you could say, is now dormant; but perhaps the present cultural and socio-political crisis we find ourselves in—climate change denial, increased wealth disparity, the rise of the political right, and class, gender, and racial discord—will prove an opportunity for its reemergence. (Reed 2020, p. 154)

Nowadays, the disappearance of Marxism as the main point of reference for social debate has given rise to the emergence of new forms of resistance and the identification of new subjectivities (Baptista 2017). In this context, a field of reflection on the reality of the poor opens up, which, although it has never been homogeneous (Baptista 2017; Althaus-Reid 2007), can be understood in a more comprehensive way than under the logic of classical labourism.

In this sense, the category of the poor has been expanded. This is why the criticism made by liberation theologians has become obsolete. In this sense, the criticism made by Althaus-Reid and Jung Mo Sung of the classical subject of liberation becomes necessary, as they understand this subject in a completely new way.

Latin American liberation theology “was never concerned with finding chairs for everybody but only with providing chairs for some of the nobodies of church and theology, the poor” (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 124). As set out by Althaus-Reid, traditional liberation theology neglected to include all excluded voices and conceived “the poor” without questioning the interrelated discourses of power and privilege (race, gender, sexuality . . .): “The poor who were included were conceived of as male, generally peasant, vaguely indigenous, Christian and heterosexual” (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 125).

The question of the transformative subject that so interested critical theory and liberation theology now must take on a new, broader reality. The space from which to realise liberation must expand, as the category of the poor expands.

Plurality appears, new voices with which to criticise and denounce reality (feminism, anti-racism, decolonial thought, etc.) that expand the conception of the subject from which the critique was developed beyond the purely economical (Baptista 2017; Althaus-Reid 2004, 2007, 2010): “The poor in Latin America (. . .) include urban poor women, transvestites in poor street neighbourhoods and gays everywhere” (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 125). The difference has long been forgotten, but this difference constitutes the very social reproduction of reality (Mau 2023, pp. 152–73), and it has to be addressed.

This expansion of the subject into a plurality of identities occurs while social inequality is expanding and accentuating and poverty takes on new faces (Filgueira and Peri 2004), as pointed out by the feminisation of poverty (Sung 2007, p. 6) (Figure 2). These facts only highlight the multiple faces of poverty, as the “poor come in many colours, cultural contexts and sexualities” (Althaus-Reid 2007, p. 127), which cannot be overlooked in the critique of the real.

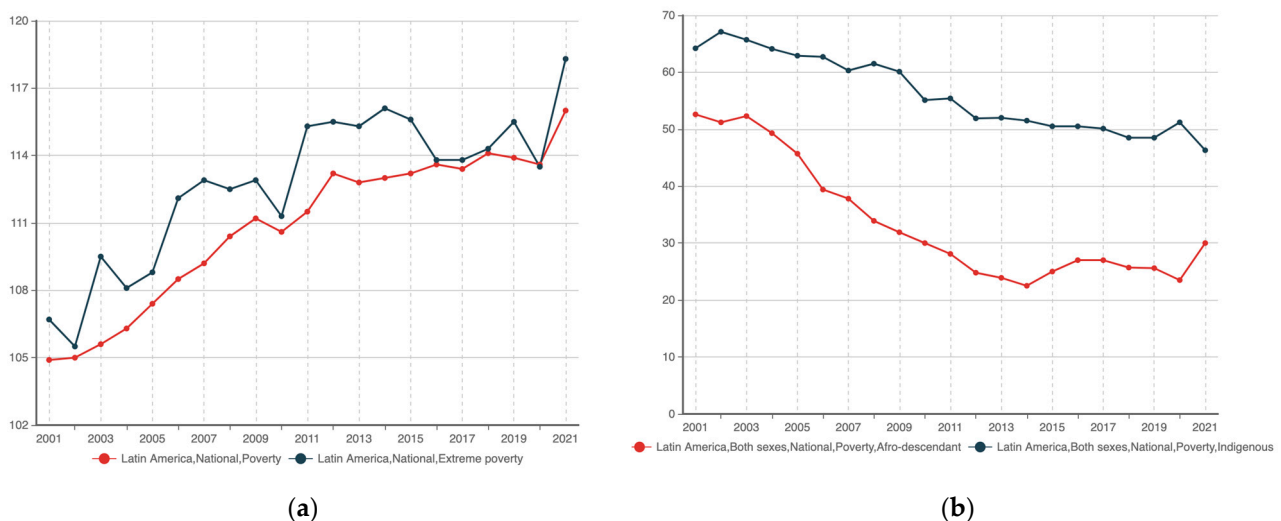


Figure 2. (a) Femininity index of extreme poverty and poverty in Latin America, 2001–2021. Source: (CEPAL 2022). (b) Population living in extreme poverty and poverty by ethnicity and sex, 2001–2021. Source: (CEPAL 2022).

The need for a theory that understands the economic and social aspects of dialectical interrelation becomes evident (Marx 1981; Adorno 2007; Jameson 2007; Heinrich 2012; Mau 2023; Althaus-Reid 2004, 2007, 2010). That is the task of the critique of the political economy, which understands the social relations that constitute society as a whole (Marx 1981; Heinrich 2012; Mau 2023; Adorno 2008).

It is not a question of discrediting cultural criticism by economic criticism—as a certain Marxism would do—but of understanding that criticism in general needs to attend to the plurality and multiplicity of reality itself (Mendoza-Álvarez 2016, p. 275; Scannone 2019a, p. 95; Sobrino 2007a, 2007b): to address the different forms of exclusion that occur under the capitalist mode of production, both discursive and material, in their unity (Dussel 2021, p. 961).

“Thus, a basic task for the Christian churches and for ecumenical organizations is to give visibility to the lives of those living on the periphery or outside the system” (Sung 2011, p. 261). Steps in this regard can be seen in the documents of the 5th CELAM Conference in Aparecida, a Church of the poor in which all the excluded peoples of Latin America are included (CELAM 2007).

As a critical theory, liberation theology can only undertake the critique of totality presented as an absolute—this absolute totality of capitalism and neoliberal society being

the supposed end of history—and reveal that it is nothing more than a false idol (Petrella 2004, p. 124).

The task of critique, therefore, consists in discovering that, behind the appearance of reality, there is nothing but exclusion and misery in the various forms that present themselves under the capitalist mode of production. The critique of the real must therefore focus on overcoming the existing order:

To understand the social order as artifact is to grasp simultaneously the possibility of acting upon it, (. . .) To understand the social order also means that social action can take place on the basis of knowledge rather than illusion or ignorance. (Gordon 1996, p. 89)

Criticism must therefore study³ reality if it is to end inequality: “the overarching reason to study capitalism is that one wants to contribute to the end of suffering” (Baumann 2022, p. 67). It is, for liberation theology, a question of sharpening the critique and interpretation of the sign of the times (Second Vatican Council 1965) for today’s world. To discover that what was originally denounced has not disappeared with the victory of capitalism, that its denunciation is still present as a “message in a bottle” (Adorno 2012) waiting to be updated and criticised.

However, such denunciation should not uncritically bring the past into the present. Theory must address its failure and incapacity to challenge the world, as well as to make a merciless critique of its discourse on the issues it failed to confront—such as the mentioned gender, race, and sexuality issues that liberation theologians failed to challenge.

Against settlement positions (Andelson and Dawsey 1992; Petrella 2004), to recompose the historical project, it would not be necessary to abandon Marxism, but rather to deepen—radicalise—it in the critique of the order of the real—by uncovering the mystified character that lies behind the naturalised appearance—taking into account the new emerging realities. It is time to address the “indecent” issues (Althaus-Reid 2010) and the many faces of poverty and exclusion (Althaus-Reid 2007), which constitute an immanent reality of capitalism.

The absolute ruling of the market’s logic means cuts in social expenditure and exclusion of the ‘incompetent’ (the poor) and of those who are not necessary any more in the current process of accumulation of capital. [. . .] The sufferings and deaths of the poor, to the extent that they are considered the other side of the coin in the ‘redeeming progress’, are interpreted as necessary sacrifices for this same progress. (Sung 2007, p. 17)

The objective conditions for the emergence of a sociohistorical context of liberation are present: poverty, exclusion, injustice, etc. A theory capable of organising thought for the transformation of the present is now needed. A theory is needed that is capable of criticising not poverty, but the very conditions of the society that reproduces, through the existence of poverty itself, its antagonisms⁴:

It is the reality of those who are indecent (Althaus-Reid 2004), excluded from society as ‘the others’, that challenges the mystified unity of society as a transparent and naturalised reality. The role of theory will be to unmask reality as a sociohistorical construct in which exclusion is not an exception, but the norm. Thus, this theoretical position will have to be able to guide praxis to bring about conscious transformation. That is, to reconstruct the sociohistorical context in which the possibility of liberation is evident.

4.2. Adornian Optics on the Future of Liberation Theology

Returning to Adorno to try to resuscitate a thought in apparent decadence seems quite necessary since “much of Adorno’s philosophical work turns precisely on this question of how we are to engage a living thought that is no longer historically current” (Jameson 2007, pp. 20–21).

Adorno’s work represents a deepening of Marxist work, at the same time as it attempts to bring Marxism out of the historical impasse into which it has entered with the evolution of Soviet dogmatism. Adorno, who, since 1950, had been denouncing the decadent state

of Marxist theory, exposes the need to return to theory when the transition to praxis has failed:

Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed. The summary judgment that it had merely interpreted the world (. . .) becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried (. . .). Theory cannot prolong the moment its critique depended on. A practice indefinitely delayed is no longer the forum for appeals against self-satisfied speculation [. . .] philosophy is obliged ruthlessly to criticize itself. (Adorno 2007, p. 3)

Adorno refers here to the *11th Thesis on Feuerbach* (Marx and Engels 2010, 5:5). Faced with the defeat of praxis, Adorno proposes not to rush to recover praxis but to reflect to avoid an unproductive praxis, which does nothing but reproduces the state of things. This is what, for Adorno, would be pseudopraxis, that blind action against the world that, in the final analysis, only serves to prop it up (Adorno 2008, pp. 52–54; Maiso 2022, pp. 100–3):

If the transition to praxis has so far failed, that should not lead to a desperate escape towards immediate action, but rather to a more ruthless reflection on the relationship between the activity of thought and the objective shaping of reality, on the configuration of praxis and its mediations; that is (. . .) the task of critical theory. (Maiso 2022, p. 84)

In the face of the defeat suffered by emancipatory thinking, utopian thinking has disappeared. It has ceased to have a place in favour of political realism and pragmatism: “we have become all too practical” (Adorno 2020, p. 58). As a result, the theory has been discredited: the positions of liberation theology have been emptied of their subversive meaning and can now be used to legitimise the present and advance the deepening and expansion of neoliberalism (Petrella 2004, p. 9).

For Adorno, in this situation, the attention of theory has to be turned back on itself: theory “finds itself compelled to criticize itself without restraint” (Adorno 2008, p. 183). Self-criticism now appears as a fundamental task in the face of the twilight. It is not a moralistic self-criticism, but an epistemological one, directed at the very core of the philosophy that had promised to be realised.

Liberation theology, faced with the defeat of its possibility of realisation with the ontological victory of capital, would have seen the importance of its historical project disappear. In this sense, it suffers the same process of defeat as the philosophy that Adorno recorded. This philosophy is not just any philosophy but refers to emancipatory thought: Marxism. Liberation theology emerged in the context of the Cold War, borrowing and making use of Marxism from a critical perspective (Petrella 2004, pp. 8–10). Liberation theology, therefore, cannot but suffer the same defeat as the context in which it emerges.

Both Marxism and liberation theology emerged and gained relevance within a specific sociohistorical context. Both schools of thought are influenced by the social, political, and economic conditions in which they emerged and developed, and will lose strength as those conditions change. This is where criticism and self-criticism become most relevant: to prevent both lines of thought from becoming stagnant, entirely dependent on objective conditions for their realisation.

Criticism and self-criticism would allow these emancipatory thoughts to continue challenging the world based on new experiences and realities. They would prevent reality from setting the conditions for realisation and enable emancipatory thought and its subject to construct those conditions themselves. Instead of waiting for better times to come, they would actively work towards building them.

Critical thought, in the face of this defeat, cannot succumb to the temptation of immediate praxis. That is, it cannot resign itself to indefinite resistance, to waiting for the moment when praxis can once again realise philosophy (Adorno 2007, p. 3). On the contrary, emancipatory thought, critical theory, must turn back on itself, reflecting on the

impossibility of its realisation in the present to try to reconstruct the historical project in the new reality in which it finds itself.

It must, therefore, turn back on itself in a self-critical task that allows it to discover the weaknesses that prevented its survival in the context of defeat. Likewise, the task of critique must also focus on the reality of the present. By observing the new reality, it must be able to carry out the necessary self-criticism, which will allow the discovery of those problems that have not been sufficiently thought through, such as gender, race, and sexuality (Althaus-Reid 2007), uncovering the power relations that have prevented adequate critique.

The new situation, in which an emancipatory praxis is not possible, offers the possibility of overcoming this problem in theory: “paradoxically, it is the desperate fact that the practice that would matter is barred which grants to thought a breathing spell it would be practically criminal not to utilize” (Adorno 2007, p. 245). Faced with the impossibility of organising the praxis of liberation, theory is offered the possibility of reorganising thought and sharpening critique. That is, the possibility, as Petrella pointed out, of reconstructing the historical project of liberation theology, of organising critique as a prior step to the reconstitution of a historical context of liberation.

In this sense, we find a divided panorama of liberation theology. On the one hand, we find theologians such as Jon Sobrino, dedicated to the reproduction of liberation thought, delving into the question of the victim and its relationship with Christology (Sobrino 1991, 2007a, 2007b).

On the other hand, we find a wide range of liberation theologies that reflect on new emerging subjectivities. These include feminist theology, LGBTQ+, theologies of the South, and environmental theology (Gebara 1999, 2002; Diniz and Gebara 2022; Mendoza-Álvarez 2016; Mendoza-Álvarez and Knauss 2019; Althaus-Reid 2003, 2010; L. Boff 2006). However, these reflections do not enjoy the importance that liberation theology enjoyed in the past. The task, therefore, is not to do theory in the abstract, but to realise theory in praxis. That is, to construct a theory that challenges the world in its totality and is capable of transforming it.

It is not about interpreting the world, but about transforming it (Marx and Engels 2010, 5:5). But this does not imply forgetting about theory. It is about realising the unity of theory and praxis proposed by Adorno (Adorno 2007, p. 3).

However, this is not a task for liberation theology alone. It is a task for the entire critical tradition. Liberation theology’s connection to the historical context from which it emerged determines its present and its future. The future of liberation theology, therefore, depends on the re-emergence of a sociohistorical context of liberation; this should not be expected, but built through the realisation of theory through praxis, considering the Adornian approach.

If we can consider liberation theology as a theological reflection on the historical praxis of liberation, recovering liberation theology for the present implies recovering the praxis of liberation itself. For this, theoretical critique and self-criticism take on a fundamental role in the construction of a new historical opportunity. Theory is the first moment of praxis, the reflexive moment that precipitates it (Ellacuría 1991, 1:47–122).

Faced with the blockage and the impossibility of developing praxis, there is no alternative but to reorganise thinking for the present (Adorno 2007). Reconstructing, as Petrella (2004) proposes, the historical project of liberation requires the reorganisation of critique and the reconstruction of thought to challenge action.

5. Conclusions

Liberation theology has been historically defeated in the context of global transformation (Hinkelammert 1995, p. 25; Trigo 2005, p. 45). There has been not only a victory of capitalism in the realm of the political economy with the disappearance of opposition and alternatives but also a victory at an ontological level (Bell 2001). As a result, the prospect of its historical project has been lost (Petrella 2004).

However, the requirement for the establishment of a novel historical project persists. Societal conditions have undergone alteration, but the persistent existence of poverty and exclusion remains.

As a result, it is necessary to undertake a two-pronged approach: criticism and self-reflection. This will entail criticism of the existing reality and self-reflection of the critical thought that comprised liberation theology: returning to the task of constructing, from a liberating praxis, not behind the previous theory, but trying to update and adapt it to the new “sign of the times” in which other social subjects appear with legitimacy: the category of the poor expands (Althaus-Reid 2007).

In contrast to the assertions made by Daniel M. Bell (2001), the development of a new historical project must not occur within the confines of the Church, but rather within the context of secular society. Furthermore, while Petrella’s (2004) accurate differentiation of the various forms of capitalism is noteworthy, their underlying socio-ontological structure remains unchanged, as well as the exclusion of the others in the margins: not just the poor in the economic sense, but the “indecent” (Althaus-Reid 2004, 2010), the poor as an all-compassing social, political, and economic category.

The future of liberation theology lies in establishing a historical project (Petrella 2004) that resists the ontological triumph of capitalism (Bell 2001) while adapting the analysis to new cultural, political, and economic realities, such as the triumphant neoliberalism and postmodernity (Sung 2007) and the emergence of the forgotten subjects, the indecent realities (Althaus-Reid 2004, 2007, 2010). A thorough study of the concrete reality is necessary for this approach. Liberation theology, as a reflection on praxis, cannot abandon the mediation of social sciences, as it is from this reflection that a theological project of historical transformation can be constituted.

Establishing a historical project to resist the triumph of capitalism, and adapting to new realities, is essential for the future of liberation theology. The interpellation of liberation theology to the existing reality is parallel to the recovery of a critical Marxism far removed from dogmatism while exploring the emancipatory subject in its plurality and complexity.

The future of liberation theology is linked to the constitution of theory to praxis, a future that corresponds not only to liberation theology but also to emancipatory thought in general. It depends on the constitution of a sociohistorical context that allows its resurgence, and that task begins with the construction of an adequate theory in praxis.

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Notes

¹ In this article, when speaking of liberation theology, reference will be made to Latin American liberation theology.

² It is noteworthy that, during this period, there was a departure from the previously demonstrated support for the reformist proposals of the liberationists by the moderate bishops in Medellín: “The key to this shift at Sucre was the majority of moderate bishops. The moderates had backed the progressive bishops at Medellín. Afterwards, however, some of them began to suspect that they had been hoodwinked by the progressive organizers of Medellín, who appeared to have railroaded their agenda through. More importantly, many moderate bishops became disturbed by the radical consequences that Medellín produced among clergy and laity, especially Christians for Socialism, and so began to back away from Medellín” (Smith 1991, p. 191).

- ³ The sense of study is that of criticism. To study reality means to criticise reality: to uncover the antagonisms and contradictions on which reality is based and that reproduce it, discovering the conditions of the “damaged life” (Adorno 2020; Maiso 2022). That is, to unravel the power that shapes society in interrelated discourses and social constructs (Althaus-Reid 2007; Mau 2023).
- ⁴ “Society stays alive, not despite its antagonism, but by means of it” (Adorno 2007, p. 320). “Bourgeois society, as an ‘antagonistic totality’, was only able to maintain itself qua its contradictions” (Bobka and Braunstein 2022, p. 38).

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