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Marx, the Praxis of Liberation Theology, and the Bane of Religious Epistemology

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Abstract: Can religious epistemology aid in the transformation of the world to the same effect as Marxist Theory? Utilizing an approach derived from Louis Althusser's isolation of the radical implications of the epistemological break of Karl Marx, from his Feuerbachian theological thought to a materialist epistemological tradition, we probe the relationship between the mystical intent of Christian theology and the appearance of praxis as a category derived from the Marxist lexicon, within the *modus cogitans* of Latin American theology of liberation. We problematise the transcendentalism that liberation theology places on social practice, in its retention of a spiritualist Weltanschauung as the preeminent framework for the critique of socio-historical reality. Far from being a materialist-transformative "epistemological break" from orthodox theology, this putative theology of revolution is thus exposed as being a brand of a Hegelian theosophy, which is discontinuous with the dialectical understanding of the socio-material basis of human relations that emerges around Marxist Theory, namely *praxis*. Our leitmotif is therefore a claim that political theology, qua theology in general, and the Latin American Theology of Liberation in particular, have a limited efficacy as a theoretical tool for socio-political transformation, due to its inherent transcendentalist and rationalistic orientation.

Keywords: Althusser; epistemological break; Feuerbach; liberation theology; Marx; political theology; praxis; religious epistemology; philosophy of religion; philosophical theology

1. Introduction

In *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutierrez*, Leonardo Boff points out that with his publication of *Teología de la Liberación, Perspectivas* (Gutierrez 1973), Gutierrez "helped to create a new epistemological field within Christian thought" (Boff 1989, p. 38). Admiring Gutierrez, he observes that "creators of an epistemological break—that is, of a new possibility of interpreting reality—are rare", and proceeds to quote from Gutierrez's classic:

The theology of liberation offers us not so much a new theme for reflection, but a new way of doing theology. Theology as critical reflection on historical praxis is a liberating theology ... This is a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed (quoting Gutierrez 1973, p. 15)

Liberation theology is here represented as an epistemological break, in which the new in its character is captured in the category of praxis, as derived from the Marxian lexicon. The rationalization of this transversal foray of Marxian consciousness into theological practice was encapsulated in the title of Argentine Methodist theologian José Míguez Bonino's book, *Christians and Marxists: The mutual challenge to revolution* (Bonino 1976), and in Jon Sobrino's *The True Church and the Poor* (Sobrino 1981), in which Sobrino seminally posits that liberation theologians consciously set out an "epistemological break" (Sobrino 1981, p. 35) from the Euro-American theoretical way of doing theology. Sobrino's

text sought to read classical religious texts, and do theology through the epistemological lens of the poor. To this “anti-abstract-theorization” emphasis, Bonino added “revolutionary commitment and practice” (Bonino 1975, p. 38) as the new element arising out of this epistemological break. Praxis was thus conceptually consummated as a disavowal of abstract theologizing that does not engage and seek to change unjust societal structures. This brought liberation theology into an epistemological affinity with the historico-materialist tradition of Western philosophy, as Aidon Nicholas’ “The story of praxis, liberation theology’s philosophical handmaid” (Nicholas 1989, pp. 45–58), as well as Nikolaus Lobkowitz’s (Lobkowitz 1984) study, *Theory and Practice: History of the Concept from Aristotle to Marx* both remind us.

With the publication of a collection of essays titled, *For Marx* (Althusser 1969), Louis Althusser inaugurated an episodic development in the debate on the periodization and evolution of Karl Marx’s thought in his insistence that Marx performed an “epistemological break” that delineates the “humanistic” early Marx from the “materialist-scientific” later Marx, when he penned his eleven theses on Feuerbach in 1845 (Althusser 1969, p. 220). In an essay entitled “On the Materialistic Dialectic”, Althusser went on to outline the meaning and implications of an epistemological break as a notion derived from the philosophy of science (ibid., pp. 219–47). He pointed out that properly conceived, an epistemological break is a paradigm-shifting, an installation of a new scientific field and a new mode of thinking. Originally conceived by French philosopher of science, Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962), *la coupure épistémologique* was deployed to refute the empiricist view that the history of science is an incremental accumulation of knowledge. Contradicting this view, Bachelard insisted that science develops through a series of discontinuous raptures, cuts (coupures). These “breaks”, given the need to avoid the fallacies contained in their preceding phases, are by nature radical and irreversible. As a necessity, the “new” rejects the preceding problematique and its concepts, and replaces these with revamped theoretical constructs. An epistemological break, “thus entails not simply the addition of new knowledge, but the reorganization of the very possibility of knowledge. It changes the conditions of what is and can be known.”¹

What is the nature of the epistemic break that liberation theology performed on Christian thought, and what is the new scientific field (Leonardo Boff uses “epistemological field” (Boff 1989, p. 39)) it inaugurated? The re-conceptualization of theology “as critical reflection on historical praxis”, a phrase incorporating a concept (“praxis”) introduced in the “Theses on Feuerbach” as part of Marx’s protestation that “hitherto philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the goal now is to change it” (Althusser 1969) appears as the consequence of this epistemological break constitutive of liberation theology. Or does it? What are the ramifications of this praxis in theology, given that it arose out of Marx’s epistemological break from speculative and contemplative thought typical of Hegel and Feuerbach during his discovery of dialectic-historical materialism? Paul J. Davies and Johannes Reimer’s (Davies and Reimer 2015) recent review of Bonino’s theology resurrects the theme of praxis as a product of an epistemological break, in a manner that frames the problematique of this paper—namely, the question of the revolutionary efficacy of this theological praxis as an epistemic framework, as it remains mediated through a fidelity to biblical reflection and ecclesiastical orthodoxy.

Obviating the broader debate on the nature of the dialectical materialism conceived by Marx, in relation to that later postulated by Frederick Engels and Vladimir Lenin, our paper focuses exclusively on the character of the Feuerbachian epistemology that Marx appraises in the “Theses on Feuerbach”, and on how this post-Feuerbach materialism relates to the embrace of Marxian epistemology in political theology, as experimented by Latin American theologians of liberation. Our mission is not an evaluation of the general use of Marx by liberation theologians; neither is it a critique of the apparent

¹ A Dictionary of Critical Theory. Oxford University Press, vid. ‘epistemological break’, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095755104>, (accessed on 25 January 2018).

affinity of liberation theology with Marxism, nor an assessment of how liberation theology deals with Marx's ontological critique of religion.

Our specific focus is on the content and value of the concept of praxis as the interpretive frame of reference that emerged from the post-Feuerbachian Marx, and the implications of this frame for theology as a discipline and mode of knowledge that is premised on transcendence. We shall therefore delineate the two dimensions of praxis, as the "coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity" (Marx and Engels 1968, p. 29) on the one hand, and as pertaining to its relationship (as parallax) to theoria, or reflection and rationalization, on the other. As we discuss liberation theology, we turn the spotlight on the latter—that is, the examination of the nature and the epistemic role of theoretical reflection in a theology that deliberately claims praxis as its hermeneutical compass. Consequently, our bibliographical point of reference shall be centered around Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" (Marx and Engels 1968, pp. 28–30) as well as "The German Ideology" (Marx 1977), and not on the sociological application of praxis as an elaboration on the socio-historical *modus vivendi* of human existence as summarized by Marx in his "Preface to the Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy" (1859).

Following a brief explicative review of the embrace of Marxist philosophy in liberation theology, against the background an Althusserian introduction of Feuerbach, we counter-pose Marx's thought on praxis against the inherent epistemic nature of theology. This exposes what we highlight as the contemplative character of liberation theology's praxis. Towards our conclusion, we provide by way of illustration, the treatment of a selection of doctrines (on sin, history, poverty, and discipleship) in Latin American liberation theology, to demonstrate how this "contemplative materialism" as a religious epistemology, in fact, assumes a form of a pre-Feuerbachian Hegelian theosophy.

2. Marx, Feuerbach and Althusser

The theological and philosophical work of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) represents a historical watershed, which marks a point of distinction between two major systems of Western philosophical thought—on the one hand, the absolute idealism of post-Kantian German philosophy, as formulated into a teleological-dialectical idealism by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), and on the other, the latent historico-dialectical materialism of Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Frederick Engels (1820–1895). Besides his achievements on the critique of speculative idealism, Feuerbach distinguished himself as a philosopher in that he preeminently explicated the theological architecture of the epistemological framework of western philosophy. Memorably, he wrote in "Provisional Theses for the Reformation of Philosophy" that:

The secret of theology is anthropology, but the secret of philosophy is theology; whoever fails to give up Hegelian philosophy fails to give up theology. The Hegelian doctrine that the nature of reality is posited by the Idea is merely the rational expression of the theological doctrine that nature is created by God, that the material essence is created by the immaterial, i.e., abstract essence . . . (Stepelevich 1977, p. 156)

In a summative statement of his philosophy in *The Essence of Christianity* (Feuerbach 1957), Feuerbach famously postulated that in worshipping God, we are actually yearning for our alienated Self:

In the object he contemplates, man becomes acquainted with himself since consciousness of the objective is the self-consciousness of man; consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge . . . whatever is God to a man, that is his heart-soul; and conversely, God is the manifested inward nature, the expressed self of man . . . (Feuerbach 1957, p. 12)

It is this Feuerbachian philosophy, particularly its assertion of the human subject as the point of departure in critical philosophical analysis, which mediated Karl Marx's move to his novel materialistic reformulation of the Hegelian dialectic, and his development of other fundamental socio-philosophical

contentions (Gregor 1994, pp. 93–103). This move, which we shall appreciate as an epistemological break, is performed in the “self-clarificatory notes” (Marx 1977, p. 5) which were posthumously published in 1932 as “The German Ideology”, and in the declaratory “Theses on Feuerbach”, penned whilst he was working on the latter in 1845–1846.

Our examination of Marx’s life writings puts us *ad idem* with Althusser, as far as he points out the radical nature of the methodological variation in the works following the “Theses on Feuerbach” (hereinafter, “Theses”), that reaches an apogee in the method of “Capital: A Critical analysis of Capitalist Production” [*Das Kapital*] (Marx 1954). We concur that this methodological break is of a nature that can rightly be characterized as an epistemological rapture, in the tradition of Bachelard’s philosophy of science, and that the *differentia specifica* of this new epistemological framework is its disavowal of ideologically susceptible modes of thought in preference of knowledge, dialectically conceived as understanding-for-transformation, which arises from the ever-changing historico-contextual base (Benton 1984, pp. 24–26; Callinicos 1976, *ad passim*).

The key feature of the methodological position that Marx develops after 1845 is his establishment of a qualitative differentiation between ideology and science as theoretico-epistemological practices. Significantly, the context and derivative meaning of this ideology is expressed in the title of “The German Ideology” (“Deutsche Ideologie”). The latter is an excoriation of the theologico-philosophical methodology (“ideology”) of the Left-Hegelians, or so-called “Young Hegelians”, who had rallied around Feuerbach’s influential critique of Hegel and Christian theology in an endeavor to recast Hegel’s thought system into an anti-establishment mold. Arising out of his observations on the determining influence of socio-historical factors on intellectual output during his 1843–1844 exposure as a journalist and observer of the debates within the socialist movement in Paris (McLellan 1969, p. 74), Marx grew concerned about the theoretical integrity of the universe of ideas, as a realm that is detached from the material base of the human condition. He thus identified as “ideology” a theoretical practice that is either unconscious of the derivative nature of its formulations, or which deliberately seeks to conceal its awareness of this fact, in order to further partisan or subjective interests (Marx 1977, pp. 37–38). As a step leading away from this vulnerability of understanding (*Verstehen*) about corrupting reality (social institutions, as viewed by Hegel, as the incarnation of Absolute Reason, or *das Geist*), Marx devoted himself to cultivating a “scientific”, non-ideological, and socially transformative way of analysis. This could only be done through his re-reading of Hegel, and the inversion of the idealist Hegelian dialectic—Hegel’s elaboration of how history moves through Absolute Reason producing its own self-contradictions (see “Afterword” to 2nd Edition of *Das Kapital*, (Marx 1954, p. 29)). This inversion, as an epistemological act, would have as its hallmark, the adoption of a disciplined (dialectical) understanding of the socio-material basis of human existence, praxis, as the basis of historical progress. That is, instead of starting off from the abstracted level of ideas, the superstructure, focus would be on social reality, holding that this reality is the interpretive key and framework of super-structural phenomenon.

How does this Marxian maturation from the ideological/abstract to the scientific/dialectico-historical, as a fundamental epistemological posture, cohere with theology as a *modus cogitans*, being a “critical reflection on historical praxis”? (Is “praxis” not by definition “historical”?). We understand Marxism to be a theory, a scientific tool of interpretation, “a canon of historical interpretation” (Creco 1966, p. 22) formulated around the inversion of Hegel’s dialectic, with an obsession with the human condition that emerged in the later Marx (Lamola 2013, pp. 187–96). This understanding alerted us to the non-consanguinity of Marxism with the mystical and rationalistic nature of Latin American liberation theology. Our concern was corroborated by Gutierrez’s admission in the essay “Liberation Praxis and Christian Faith”, in the collection *The Power of the Poor in History* (Gutierrez 1983, pp. 36–75) that “the rationalistic-theoretical is accorded significant prominence in liberation theology” (Gutierrez 1983, p. 67). We shall therefore problematise the transcendentalism that liberation theology places on social practice, through its retention of a spiritualist *Weltanschauung* as the preeminent framework for the critique of socio-historical reality. This mystical intent of Christian theology,

and the simultaneous appearance of praxis within the *modus cogitans* of liberation theology caused us to question the notion of praxis as an antonym of *theoria*, in the sense the intrinsic rationalistic and transcendentalist nature of religious epistemology are emblematic of *theoria*. Can religious epistemology, as liberation theology, aid understanding for transformation of the world, to the same effect as praxis as conceived within Marxist Theory would?

3. The Triumph of Marx in Theology

In *The Militant Gospel: An Analysis of Contemporary Political Theologies* (Fierro 1977), Spanish theologian Alfredo Fierro asserts that the emergence of Christian political theology is chiefly a result of “the incorporation of dialectical reasoning and historical materialism into Western thought” (Fierro 1977, p. 2). In corroboration of this observation, in his seminal formulation of the systematic account of a theology of liberation as a political theology that emerged from Central and Southern America in the early 1970s, Gutierrez affirms that “it is to a large extent due to Marxism’s influence that theological thought, searching for its own sources, has begun to reflect on the meaning of the transformation of this world and the action of man in history.” (Gutierrez 1973, p. 9).

Beyond this affirmation of the fact of the service of Marxism as a significant catalyst in the search for an epistemological framework of analysis that would best exhaust the socio-historical relevance of the Christian faith in the contemporary world, we find that within liberation theology, Marxism is upheld as a theoretical tool, whose conscientious application is posited as the *conditio sine qua non* for the realization of the liberation that this theology envisions. This view, or rather conviction, was declared by, amongst others, Bonino, who in his *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age* (Bonino 1975) stated that Marxist theory “has proved, and still proves to be, the best instrument available for an effective and rational realization of human possibilities in historical life ... it is the unavoidable historical mediation of Christian obedience” (Bonino 1975, p. 97). Bonino buttressed this a year later in a book with a telling title, *Christians and Marxists: The Mutual challenge to Revolution* (Bonino 1976), where he states:

As Christians confronted by the inhuman conditions of existence have tried to make their Christian Faith historically relevant, they have been increasingly compelled to seek an analysis and historical program for their Christian obedience. At this point, the dynamics of the historical process, both in its objective conditions and its theoretical development, have led them, through the failure of several remedial reformist alternatives, to discover the unsubstitutionable relevance of Marxism. (Bonino 1976, p. 19)

Poignantly, Bonino’s analysis resonates with Gutierrez’s concurrence with and endorsement of Jean-Paul Sartre’s declaration that “Marxism, as the formal framework of all contemporary philosophical thought, cannot be superseded” (quoted in Gutierrez 1973, p. 9).

The apex of this embrace of Marxist philosophy in Christian theology would be the celebrated publication in 1985 of *Fidel and Religion: Fidel Castro in conversations with Frei Betto on Marxism and Liberation Theology* (Castro and Betto 2006). According to Betto, a Dominican friar who had endured imprisonment in his home country of Brazil because of his anti-government church work, the book became an instant international bestseller because “it was the first time that a communist leader in office had spoken positively about religion and admitted that it, too, could help change reality, revolutionize a country, overthrow oppression, and establish justice” (Castro and Betto 2006, p. 5).

Whilst Alberto Feirro completed his survey of the political theologies with a conclusion that could only be framed as a question as to whether “a materialist theology”, which is what Marxist epistemology seems to adumbrate vis a vis theology, is possible (Fierro 1977, p. 10). In 1978, Mexican theologian José Miranda overtook Feirro’s consternation with his *El Cristianismo de Marx*, published in English as *Marx Against the Marxists: The Christian Humanism of Karl Marx* (Miranda 1980).

Miranda’s work served as a notable milestone within the intellectual struggle of liberation theology to define its relationship with Karl Marx. In it, Miranda went beyond the traditional position

that Marxism and Christianity are compatible, and posits an argument that Marx's entire thought was essentially and consciously not only humanistic, in the sense of emphasizing the importance of the human subject in an epistemological process, but that actually, Marx's was a Christian humanism. Miranda wrote about "the Gospel roots of Marx's thought" (Miranda 1980, p. 197) and that Marx's philosophy is a "conscious continuation of early Christianity" (Miranda 1980, p. 224). In 1982, he released his exegetical *Communism and the Bible*.

Miranda's school of thought was to be fueled by the high-profile publication of *Fidel and Religion*. For our purposes, we note Frei Betto's lamentation in the introduction to the book's second edition in 2006, reflecting on the still-ambiguous fraternity between the Cuban Catholic church and the Cuban government since the euphoric détente occasioned by the publication of the book, and that "what the Cuban bishops lack is a theology that allows them to understand socialism as an absolutely necessary stage on the path toward the kingdom of God . . ." (Castro and Betto 2006, p. 7).

4. Anti-Rationalism and Orthopraxis

As we noted in our introduction, according to Sobrino (supporting Leonardo Boff's view), the Latin American theology of liberation signifies a consciously initiated "epistemological break" (Sobrino 1981, p. 35) with the methodology of European theology, which he portrays as having as its hallmark a veneration of abstract thinking and idealism. Liberation theology, Sobrino explains, came about and remains a negation of this idealist form of thinking (Sobrino 1981, pp. 35–38). It is a conscious attempt at a materialist (practical) epistemology, in the sense of being a negation of a rationalism that fails to issue into social action. Sobrino set out to specifically emphasize that the entire motif of liberation theology derived its basis from a castigation of "speculative thought", and focuses on the importance of the social context of the thinking person as the point of departure of the theological process. He pointed out that it is absolutely necessary for self-authentication of whatever can be equated with Christian theology that it begins its activity with an analysis of the social conditions of those who are involved in the theological process, the *locus theologicus* (the materially-impovertised believers). This imperative to engage with the social and historical context of the *locus theologicus* is then conceptualized into a methodological category of praxis (Sobrino 1981, p. 16).

Furthermore, Sobrino, who the Vatican censored (issued a Notification against) in 2006 for "the methodological presuppositions on which [he] bases his theological reflections"², asserts that unlike in "European theology", in Latin American liberation theology it is the demands arising out of life experience that provide material for theological work, and not reasoning and logic (Sobrino 1981, p. 20). Not even the injunctions of this reason, as ecclesiastical orthodoxy, are the *point de départ* and goal of liberation theology. Instead and in negation of orthodoxy, Sobrino foregrounded "orthopraxis". The employment of orthopraxis, Gutierrez had already explained, was "to recognize the work and importance of concrete behavior, of deeds, of action, of praxis in the Christian life" (Gutierrez 1973, p. 10). It is significant that the doxological in orthodoxy is directly contrasted with orthopraxis. The right, or accepted way of worshiping God (orthodoxy as opposed to heterodoxy), is juxtaposed with the right way of living out one's faith, according to Gutierrez and Sobrino.

In parallel, in *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age*, Bonino, a Protestant theologian, argues that liberation theology is founded on a "revolutionary commitment" (Bonino 1975, p. 38) to render the theological effort a cogent facilitator of the liberation of the poor. The participation in revolution, as an obedience to the Word of God, would, in Bonino's postulation, also translate in orthopraxis (Bonino 1975, p. 98).

This "revolutionary commitment", expressed as an anti-idealist attitude questing for a materialist theoretical framework, and the adoption of the predicament of the human condition in the oppressive

² http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20061126_notification-sobrino_en.html, accessed on 28 January 2018.

and repressive political context of the Latin America of the 1970s and 1980s as a point of departure of theology, constitute the two epistemic pillars of the praxis of the Latin American theology of liberation. We are most fascinated by the first of the twin pillars of this praxis: the claimed rejection of and critique of speculative rationality, whilst at the same time endeavoring to be a theology that is grounded within the acceptable orthodoxy of the ecclesiastical regime. This contrast directs focus on the epistemological aspect of praxis, that is, the nature and content of its relationship with *theoria* as orthodoxy questing (*quaerens*) orthopraxis.

As a further tension between orthodoxy and Marxist-inspired “revolutionary commitment” as praxis, it is worth noting that the Peruvian Gutierrez appealed against the threat of excommunication by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s “Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith” in 1984, successfully “proving his orthodoxy” (Torres 1989, p. 98). Gutierrez’s writings after *A Theology of Liberation* veered toward themes of spirituality, with the most successful work since then being a theodicy, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Gutierrez 1987). In the year 2015, he was invited to the Vatican, in what has variously been viewed as the eventual accommodation of his theology of liberation by the ecclesiastical authority. On the other end, there were liberation theologians who were persecuted by the Church, emblematic of whom was Nicaraguan Fernando Cardenal, who landed an appointment as Minister of Education in the 1979 government of the Marxist Sandinistan National Liberation Front (FSLN)³. It has thus to be admitted that there were some variations on the conceptualisation and actualisation of praxis across the diverse geopolitical contexts of South and Central American countries. Obviously, the Nicaraguan liberation theology movement offered an orthopraxis that varied from that of Gutierrez (Hindley 2015).

In terms of scholarly self-application, next to Gutierrez, Enrique Dussel was to distinguish himself as the Latin American theologian who would set himself up as a formal philosopher, a “philosopher of liberation”, who laboured to decode the inter-disciplinarity in the meaning of concepts used in liberation theology for the non-religious world (Dussel 1985). Dussel would, in relation to praxis, emphasise “ethics”, *inter alia* averring: “Liberation philosophy affirms that ethics (and therefore politics, as first horizon) is *prima philosophia*. Philosophy begins with reality, and human reality is practical, always a priori person-to-person relationships in a communication community (of language and life), presupposed in reality (objectively) and transcendently (subjectively)” (Dussel 1996, p. 7). This theme emanated from his earlier theological *Ethics and Community* (Dussel 1986), in which ethics, as theoretical reflection on morality, is affirmed as *prima theologia* (Dussel 1986, p. 18).

The arrival at a formulation of praxis as a reasoned normative framework—how to live in community as exhorted in the Word of God (as orthopraxis)—as articulated by Dussel, crystallises our identified *status quaestionis* on the apparent affinity of liberation theology to the thought of Karl Marx—specifically, how the concept of praxis as applied in liberation differs from Marx’s conception of ‘ideology’ and the *theoria* within praxis.

5. Marx’s Theses on Praxis

The enlightenment that dawned on Marx’s thinking as he penned the “Theses on Feuerbach”, and the catalytic effect this has had on social science since is, in our consideration, comparable to the effect that Martin Luther’s ninety-five theses posted on the door of the Wittenberg Castle church in 1517 had on western civilisation. A rapturous and new frame of reference, and a “scientific dispensation” of understanding how social structures rise and fall was inaugurated. From the first (“Thesis I”) to the famous eleventh (“Thesis XI”), “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (Marx and Engels 1968, p. 30) the “Theses” are a critique of “all

³ For a 2005 interview of Fernando Cardenal by Mathew Krain, distilling the fact that Nicaraguan liberation theology was ‘a religious movement, and not a socialist movement’ see <http://liberationtheology.voices-old.wooster.edu/documents/document-7/>.

previous materialism” as pertaining to the essence of the nature of human existence and the *modus operandi* of its self-interpretive capacity (consciousness).

Feuerbach, who had been the chief protagonist for the shifting of Hegel’s philosophy from its foundation on transcendental Absolute Reason, or the Spirit (*das Geist*), to the realm of the human being (“Man”), since his publication of *The Essence of Christianity*, was castigated by Marx for confabulating religious thinking with the reality of the human essence as a self-subsisting (“labor”) social existence. The apogee of the “Theses” became Marx’s declaration that in changing their environment, human being are creating circumstances that in turn change them: “the coincidence of the changing circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice” (“Theses III”, (Marx and Engels 1968, p. 30)). Here, the Marxian re-conceptualization of praxis, a concept dating back from Aristotle, is seminally enunciated. It is materialism newly conceived as an observation of human consciousness being modelled by labor, the development of forces of production (productive forces), and the resultant social relations, which in turn determine how that human labor power is expended. The emphasis upheld is that “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations” (“Thesis VI”, (Marx and Engels 1968, p. 29)). Where one finds oneself socially in a stratified society is one’s essence.

However, the value of the message of the “Theses”, taken within the context of the juncture of Marx’s intellectual development in which they were penned, does not yet rest on the active political meaning of praxis; it rests on the isolation, identification, and rejection of the Feuerbachian way of thinking about human reality. This is the *causa bellum*, the reason for his epistemological rupture from Feuerbach. This point is vitally important to our discussion of the putatively Marxian epistemology of liberation theology.

Here, Marx explicitly reckons that “in *The Essence of Christianity*, he [Feuerbach] regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuine attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty-juridical form of appearance. Hence he does not grasp the significance of ‘revolutionary’, of ‘practical–critical’, activity.” (“Thesis I”, (Marx and Engels 1968)). What he is addressing and disavowing here is the regard of *theoria*, “the theoretical attitude” as the primary epistemological-hermeneutical *modus cogitans*. Subsequent scholarship has generally interpreted *theoria* vis a vis praxis as simply meaning the employment of intellection over observed experience, or simply as “reflection” (Bin-Kapela 2011, p. xii). For Marx, thinking (reflection) is a dialectical material undertaking, an understanding-for-transformation of social reality. This subsumes *theoria* into the revolutionary practical–critical activity—that is, praxis.

Experienced reality, which Marx here refers to simply as human “practice”, was viewed in Hegel as the self-estrangement of, interchangeably, Absolute Reason, Idea, Spirit, *das Geist*, or God, who is in all things—which in turn, during the thinking process (*verstehen*) is reconciled (*aufhebung*) with the thinking being (Hegel 1984, pp. 83–88). Feuerbach and the Left-Hegelians (Bruno Bauer and company) proposed a variation: the epistemological starting point must be reality, and not a fascination with the hypostasis of reason. This reason upon reality would be critique. The Left-Hegelians then developed this into a philosophical category named “critical criticism”, or simply Critique (Kee 1990, pp. 69–76). Critique was conceived as a participation in the hypostasis of the Hegelian dialectic. It was reason functioning as the anti-thesis. It was progressive step from what Hegel had merely postulated as “understanding”, and was thus fêted as a step into the Hegelian dialectic that Hegel himself had missed or neglected (Stepelevich 1977, pp. 451–63). Through critique, reality is saved from its self-alienation. In Feuerbach, this meant the retrieval of the human essence from its self-alienation that results from Hegelian theological thinking.

In the “Theses”, at this stage of his intellectual development, Marx could only focus on his disavowal of this methodological standpoint of critique as an abstract mode of thought that leads to contemplative materialism. Sympathy with this theosophical mode of analysis is comprehensively buried in a joint publication with Engels, entitled *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Criticism*:

against Bruno Bauer and Company (Marx 1977, pp. 1–221). When he settled in London two years later, Marx would read the history of human societies and economics with a new epistemic framework, the dialectic–materialist epistemology that reveals itself in the content of the 1848 *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

The postulation of praxis as developed in the “Theses” is, therefore, the template against which we shed light on praxis as conceived in liberation theology.

6. Praxis as Contemplative Materialism

As noted, Gutierrez famously defined liberation theology as “a critical reflection on historical praxis” (Gutierrez 1973, p. 11). The terms “critical” and “reflection” are instrumentally significant against the background of what we just learned about the methodology and mission of the Left-Hegelians. Within this definition, it is clear that the rationalistic–theoretical approach is still accorded a significant measure of prominence, despite Sobrino’s assertion that the method of liberation theology actively differentiates itself from rationalistic and speculative mainline European theology, and is thereby Marxian in its epistemological intentions (Sobrino 1981, p. 36). Archetypically, Gutierrez would ameliorate this anti-rationalism thus:

Theology as a critical reflection on praxis in the light of the Word [of God] does not replace the other functions of theology, such as wisdom and rational knowledge; rather it presupposes them. (Gutierrez 1973, p. 13)

Similarly, with regard to Sobrino’s revolutionary commitment and orthopraxis, Gutierrez would underline that during the course of Latin American liberation theology, “revolutionary activity simply became a new field for the application of theological reflection” (Gutierrez 1973, p. 17).

The central conception of theology as a logos in content, and as an act of religious reflection applying symbolic language on historical experience, is generally adhered to and preserved. Liberation theology is a “critical reflection on praxis in the light of the Word” (Gutierrez 1973, p. 13). In their critical appreciation of Bonino’s theology, Davies and Reimer (2015) underscore how Bonino admirably grounded his thought on biblical precepts and hermeneutics. This invites attention to literature about the challenges of religious epistemology, such as Dan R. Stiver’s *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol, Story* (Stiver 1996). For our immediate purposes of a historico-philosophical review, however, we have to restrict ourselves to referencing the poignancy of Marx’s appraisal of Feuerbach to the materialist revolutionary character of the *theoria* that is immanent in liberation theology.

In the opening thesis (“Thesis I”), Marx agonizes that, “The chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things, reality, sensuousness are conceived only in the form of the object of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice [praxis], not subjectively” (Marx and Engels 1968, p. 28). Marx takes up the charge further in “Thesis V”, that “Feuerbach, not satisfied with abstract thinking, advocates sensuous contemplation . . . ” (Marx and Engels 1968, p. 28). In attempting to supplant Hegelian abstract idealism, Feuerbach posited a “contemplative materialism” (“Thesis IX” in (Marx and Engels 1968)). The word that Marx uses for “contemplative” or “contemplation” in the original German of the “Theses” is *Betrachtung*. This translates into English as “meditation” or “religious reflection”. Marx came to the conclusion that Feuerbach’s epistemology is nothing but a meditation seeking to be merely empiricist.

In considering the relationship between Marxism and liberation theology, and recalling that Gutierrez defined a theology of liberation as “an attempt at reflection, based on the Gospel and the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation, in the oppressed and exploited land of Latin America” (Marx and Engels 1968, p. xi), we are therefore struck by the appearance of “reflection” as a proposition for a revolutionary cognitive practice. What are the epistemological features of this reflection based on the Gospel, and “reflection on praxis in the light of the Word of God” (Marx and Engels 1968, p. 13)? We can isolate only one—namely, what the phrase literally means: the abstraction of the theological schema, themes as well as dogma, and a use of these as a

universalistic paradigm for interpreting concrete social reality. It is contemplative materialism, or *Betrachtung*. This is *theoria* with its primacy and paramount role affirmed. In confirmation of our observation, Gutierrez writes: “Theology . . . as linked to praxis, fulfils a prophetic function insofar as it interprets historical events with the intention of revealing and proclaiming their profound meaning” (Marx and Engels 1968, p. 13).

This is, precisely, an epistemological practice, whereby theology, which in Marx is a super-structural intellectual effort, is used to “give meaning” to the substratum of natural historical existence. This disregards the fact that the content and language of theology, according to historical-materialism, is generated and shaped by the substratum of the socio-economic relations of the historical and cultural context from which that theology emerges. This idea also contradicts Marx’s method of starting with the material, given as the modicum of giving meaning to the theoretical. Therefore, by starting with, or basing itself on the theoretical, on the “Word” (*Logos*; Bible, John 1:1–14), liberation theology is open to the charge of being identified as an ideology, as understood in Marx. This, in fact, is what spurred Juan Luis Segundo to engage in what turned to be the unsuccessful project of *Faith and Ideologies: Jesus of Nazareth Yesterday and Today* (Segundo 1984).

Taken as a theology of the logos itself, that is, at how the historical Jesus of Nazareth is theologized and meditated away as the Word of God that subsequently becomes flesh and is then transfigured back into heaven, this contemplative materialism steps back into pre-Feuerbachian Hegelian idealism. Indeed, in the preface to the 1844 *Paris Manuscripts* Marx noted that:

On close inspection theological criticism—genuinely progressive though it was at the inception of the movement—is seen in the final analysis to be nothing but the culmination and consequence of the old philosophical and especially the Hegelian transcendentalism, twisted into a theological caricature (quoted in (Kee 1990, p. 69))

In order to corroborate and amplify our foregoing claims on the historico-epistemological location of liberation theology, as well as the quality of its revolutionary efficacy, we propose to proceed to demonstration, with a few illustrations to show how this contemplative materialism exhibits itself in this theological tradition.

7. Contemplative Epistemology Action

As one example of the “reflection” method of liberation theology, and the way this reveals “profound meaning” (Gutierrez 1973, p. 13), it is important that we note the critical theme of history in liberation theology, as this occupies a vital role in Hegel’s philosophy and in Marxian materialism. Significantly, the full title of the English translation of liberation theology’s primal classic by Gutierrez is *A Theology of Liberation: History, Salvation and Politics*. Here, Gutierrez proclaimed that: “We have recovered the idea that history is an intrahistorical reality. Furthermore, that, salvation—the communion of men with God, and the communion of men among themselves—orients, transforms, and guides history to its fulfilment” (Gutierrez 1973, p. 152). This Hegelian anti-Marxist statement emanates from Gutierrez’s following definition of history:

Human history is a political occupation through which man orients and opens himself to the gift which gives history its transcendent meaning: the full and definitive encounter with the Lord and other men. (Gutierrez 1973, p. 10)

How profound! Is this “transcendent meaning” not a mystification of human history, a transfiguration of human history into “History” the transcendental concept? This is similar to Feuerbach’s apotheosis of anthropology into a theologico-philosophical analytic concept of “Man”, or Hegel’s theosophical postulation of history as the teleological locus of Absolute Reason, through which human civilisation is oriented towards freedom.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx provided the following succinct analysis of Feuerbach’s transcendentalist method, which we maintain will be applicable to theologies that claim a material

socio-political *point de départ*, whilst at the same time venerating the supernatural dimension as the framework of interpretation:

Feuerbach's 'conception' of the sensuous world is confined on the one hand to mere contemplation of it, and on the other to mere feeling; he posits 'Man' instead of 'real historical man' . . . in the contemplation of the sensuous world, he necessarily lights on things which contradict his consciousness and feeling . . . to remove this disturbance, he must take refuge in double perception, a profane one which perceives 'only the flatly obvious' and a higher, philosophical one, which perceives the 'true essence' of things. (Marx 1977, p. 39)

By applying theological categories on concrete socio-historical reality, and in positing these categories as determinative hermeneutical premises for explaining reality, liberation theology is actually constructing abstract notions out of socio-historical reality. In the least, which cannot be denied, liberation theology imposes an interpretative mantle of religion upon its object of analysis, and gives to social reality purely mythical meanings, which go beyond the acceptable role of a myth as being a hermeneutic aid. In the foregoing example, Gutierrez fetishizes history and reifies the idealized mythological-religious result/notion as the ultimate experience.

Liberation theology reduces social processes and experience into theological dogmas; the result is that praxis, transforming reality, is then left conceived as a riddled system of dogmatic inconsistencies, which are perpetually in search of some form of an esoteric resolution or another. The most pertinent example of this resultant theoretic confusion we find in the application of the doctrine of sin as *theoria*, an interpretive principle in political analysis. We encounter this analysis in Dussel's political ethics:

. . . someone may be born wealthy, a member of the dominant class and a moneyed, bourgeois family. He or she is surely not responsible for having been born there. But just as surely, this individual inherits this institutional "originary" sin. Thus as Paul proclaims, it is possible for death to reign even over those who had not sinned by breaking a precept as did Adam (Rom 5: 14). (Dussel 1986, p. 21)

This, according to Dussel, is an analytical judgment on an exploitative class in capitalist society. The bourgeoisie—the ruling class—is a community of sinners, but most of them are sinners not by choice. They simply have the fortuitous misfortune of being born into families whose class location happens to produce, exploit, and oppress the poor.

Having characterized the moneyed bourgeois families in such biblical terms, where does Dussel's postulation leave the poor? He elaborates:

The constitutive act of the 'poor' in the Bible is not lacking goods, but being dominated, and this by the sinner. The poor are the correlative of sin. As the fruit of sin, their formality as 'poor' constitutes the poor or oppressed, and as such, the just and holy . . . The poverty or want suffered by the poor is not the sheer absence of goods. No, the poverty of the poor consists in having been despoiled of the fruit of their labor by reason of the objective domination of sin. (Dussel 1986, p. 21)

The impoverished, who in Marx's historico-materialist analysis of capitalist social relations would be characterized as the exploited labor power, are poor simply because they have to mirror, signify, and actualize "the objective domination of sin"! Such is perhaps the inadvertent results of the logic of a theosophical praxis.

In the same vein, in their *The Bible, the Church, and Poor* Clodovis Boff and George Pixley hold that the poor, who struggle against structures of oppressive opulence, are a "sacrament of God" (Boff and Pixley 1989, p. 111). This theme is taken up by Bishop Moacyr Grechi in his foreword to the same book. He summarizes the message of the book with the singular theme that God is using the poor to save the Church, and thereby the world: "Without the poor, the church loses its Lord, who

identified with them and elevated them into final judges of this world. Without the poor, the church is simply lost" (Boff 1989, p. 1).

This nebulous portrayal of victims of an unjust system, in terms that dissuade them from mobilizing themselves for their liberation, or an analysis which make it impossible for them to be made conscious of the causes of their domination in material-scientific terms is, according to Engels in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* ([1888] (Marx and Engels 1968, pp. 584–607)), exactly what Feuerbach's "neueren Philosophie" was about. Apart from this fallacious materialism, Marx had epistemologically defected by critically developing a new analytical approach, as Engels explains:

[Feuerbach] is realistic since he takes his start from man . . . this man remains always the same abstract man who occupies the field of the philosophy of religion. For this man is not born of a woman; he issues, as a chrysalis, from the god of the monotheistic religions. He therefore does not leave in a real world historically determined . . . But from the abstract man of Feuerbach one arrives at real living men only when one* considers them as participants in history. And that is what Feuerbach resisted . . . But the step which [he] did not take had nevertheless to be taken. The cult of abstract man, which formed the kernel of Feuerbach's new religion, had to be replaced by the science of real men and of their historical development. This further development to Feuerbach's standpoint beyond Feuerbach was inaugurated by Marx in 1845 in *The Holy Family*. (Marx and Engels 1968, p. 604)

To subsume all reality into a religious cognitive system is a hallmark of Feuerbachianism, as being both a preservation of the theologism of Hegel, as well as the privileging of *theoria* over *praxis*.

The consequence of this idealist epistemology is logically—in the context of the fundamental intent of Marx's philosophy—exposed in the ultimate meaning of the "revolutionary commitment" that liberation theological practice is supposedly grounded upon. According to Gutierrez, Boff, and Bonino, the church's engagement and commitment to historical ("secular") liberation struggles is not an end in and of itself: "this commitment is [merely] the matrix for a discovery of the true meaning of discipleship", informs Bonino (Eagleson and Drury 1975, p. xxv). He then proceeds to quote from the final document "Christians for Socialism" (participants at the conference held in Santiago, Chile, in April 1972 under the same theme):

The Christian committed to revolutionary practice discovers the liberating force of the love of God, of the death and resurrection of Christ. He discovers that his faith does not imply the acceptance of a world that is already made, or of a predetermined history, but rather that the very living of his faith involves the creation of a new and solitary world and leads to historical initiatives fertilized by Christian hopes. (Eagleson and Drury 1975, p. xxv)

Revolutionary participation in the transformation of history is interpretatively rendered subservient to the higher ideal of attaining and experiencing a more profound religious experience, the epiphany of the experience of the love of God. In other words, all forms of struggle, from the wider class struggle to the very political skirmishes that the oppressed occasionally mount against their oppressors, are acts of Faith. They are ritual. They are acts through which "the true meaning of discipleship" is discovered.

Latin American liberation theology itself is not, per se, an intentional development of a theoretical apparatus aimed at being used as a weapon for structural transformation, as Jon Sobrino explains:

Latin American liberation theology is interested in the liberating of the real world from its wretched state since it is this objective situation that has obscured the meaning of faith. Its task is not primarily to restore the meaning of faith in the presence of the wretched conditions of the real world. It is to transform this real world and at the same time recover the meaning of the faith. The task, therefore, is not to understand the faith differently, but to allow a new faith to spring from a new practice. (Sobrino 1981, p. 20)

A fortiori, the primary goal of this new practice (praxis?) is religious: to transform the world so that it can be sanctified (evangelized) and serve as the script for further revelations. In the process, even Marxism as a social theory is transfigured into a religious artefact, an icon—an aid for religious contemplation. This is encapsulated in Bonino’s epic pronouncement that Marxism is embraced in the program of liberation theology as “the unavoidable historical mediation of Christian obedience” (Bonino 1976, p. 98). It is out of this understanding that Frei Betto could state that, “what the Cuban bishops lack is a theology that allows them to understand socialism as an absolutely necessary stage on the path toward the kingdom of God . . . ” (Castro and Betto 2006, p. 7).

8. Conclusions

What we have set out to demonstrate is that insofar as it sought to situate itself within the historico-epistemological milieu of Marxist thought, the Latin American theology of liberation has remained intractably trapped in a Hegelian religious transcendentalism, as expressed in a Feuerbachian contemplative materialism. It develops mystical constructs out of historical contradictions, and rationalistically uses this mystical matrix as an ethical imperative to resolve the same historical contradictions, which in turn results in a circuitous mystification of historical reality. The theorized mystical matrix—as theology, the “Word of God”—is paramount and reified. This is not praxis qua Marxian praxis. Even as *theoria*, its abstractive and ahistorical conceptualization or contemplation of the victims of social injustice (“the poor”) disqualifies it as a theoretical tool for social revolution.

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