

Liberation and dependency: a theological reading of social sciences in Latin America¹

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Abstract

Introduction: In the early 1970s, social movements directed Latin American theology to a creative process of deprivatization of the Christian faith, reconfiguring – from the community practices of *liberation* and their holistic implications – the theoretical exercise concerning its political and social commitment. Consequently, the notion of *liberation* began to be addressed by the opposite equivalent of *dependency* within the methodological framework of the biblical-theological approach. **Objective:** To understand the meaning of the opposite correlation between liberation and dependency from their specificities in accordance with the vision of liberation intellectuals, and identify the way in which dependency was appropriate to respond to the responsive and socio-analytical theoretical framework of these intellectuals, linking the reading of reality to the Latin American community practice. **Methods:** Historical and systematic research, exploratory, under an analytical-descriptive orientation, organized from conceptual schemes. **Results:** Based on the finding regarding the theoretical refraction of *dependency* through liberation, the concept emerges as the *theological interpretation* of an entire theoretical field taken indistinctly, namely the *Dependency Theory*. **Conclusion:** The opposite correlation between *dependency* and *liberation* as a finding that reveals the similarity between the real that is theorized (dependency) and the hypothetical conceptualization of maxims of action (liberation), comprehended within the general theory of anti-imperialism, resulted in an interdisciplinary theological reflection.

Keywords: Liberation Theology. Dependency Theory. Sociology. Underdevelopment

1. Introduction

With the dawn of the 1960s and the entry of social movements on the political agenda in Latin America as well as the need for new interpretations on the continent's economic and political situation, marked by the paradigm of Development Theory, theology also sought to establish new spaces of interpretation of social events. A fruit of this need was the organization of Liberation Theology as an autochthonous

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approach, peculiar to contextuality and settled in a reflection that takes the social and political reality as the starting point for theorizing about the Christian social practice.

In this paper, we will briefly discuss Latin American theology's reading of *Dependency Theory*, which was developed at the core of *Developmentalism* metatheory between the 1930s and 1950s. One can see that Liberation Theology has chosen a strictly political option amidst the Latin American Christians' struggles for liberation over the last decades of the twentieth century.

2. Liberation Theology and its reading of Dependency Theory

Liberation Theology was established as a theological interpretation of *social sciences*, specifically conditional on *Dependency Theory*, thus transferring its own reading of the Latin American *empiricism* to a supposed delimitation of the *theological reflection* in the realm of faith.

In itself, according to the interpretive-bibliographical investigation, this definition of the historical reconstruction oriented by the clinical theory of Bourdieu's scientific field presents us with the Latin American theology as the socio-cultural and political epiphenomenon of an attempt to define the theological field of action, both in internal relations, the immediate context of ecclesiastical organization, and in external relations, integration of the immediate context and the globalized-unified history, whose understanding of the history of salvation goes through epistemological reformulations in the period of transition from the 1960s to the 1970s (see Bourdieu 2004).

What must be understood here, oriented by a theological interpretation of *social sciences*, a concept involved with the general theory of the anti-imperialist, but not any analytical-normative formulation from which one could draw empirical-analytical inferences, is that such theology resulted from a broad and fruitful period of debates within intellectual groups in Latin America regarding national identities and their roles in international politics, being one of its theoretical results *the theological interpretation of politics* as well as assumptions about its maxims of action.

A similar way to understand the Latin American theology implies a specific definition to observe and understand the cultural-political phenomenon that is the emergence of a theory of global reach from a political and peripheral geography, so to speak. The issues related to dogmatics, ministry, ecclesiology and Christology pass from an understanding guided by *methodological presuppositions of an axiomatic background* (geographically located and made universal) to a holistic interpretation from the community practice of political and cultural involvement with the fight against a *geography of hunger and misery*, practices grasped from places and which have determined causes, regarding social types historically constructed.

It is true that theology is a cultural phenomenon blended by its cultural and political specificities, varying from one place to another. However, such a finding has not always asserted the theological thinking wherever it was developed, and very often the plurality of autochthonous voices were subsumed and established from North Atlantic indications, at least with regard to the discourse built according to the dogmatics of the Christian church throughout modernity. To reach a succinct knowledge of the political and socio-cultural phenomenon, which is here the development of a systematic corpus of religious character, and one that may be at the same time positive, it is important to observe an appropriate method. In the case of Latin American theology, this was a dialectical-conflictive method.

3. Liberation Theology

Liberation Theology sought to attach importance to the correlation between *dependency* and *liberation*, thus denoting a dialectical-materialist aspect of the situation of peripheral economies of globalized capitalism. Theology until then would flirt with structural-functional and often conservative tendencies, which kept Neo-Scholastic models at the base of its reasoning. These tendencies served to maintain a certain *status quo* and bound schemes of dominant thoughts still riddled with colonial legacies that were reproduced in social structures⁴. Paternalism was its most evident feature (Faoro 1979).

Theology was also impacted by social movements that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s (Sader 1988:141-196). Many current tendencies thrived on development in that period. There were theologies of *development*, *action* (New Christianity) (Dussel 1978:124-126), *revolution* (Shaull 1953; also Alves 2004) or *technology* (Dussel 1999:51-119). Latin America was under the influence of significant changes in the old world, like the Second Vatican Council and the new perspectives in Protestant theology, and its most characteristic result was the ecumenical openness.

With the changes in the theoretical field concerning the Latin American geopolitical situation, theology passed from a sociographic view, in the words of Dussel, to a more sociological view. Along with the changes in the perception of the totality of globalized capitalism, theology made an epistemological change, namely a historicist dialectical-materialist-conflictive turn. It passed from a conservative trend and from a mediator of classes to a tendency which postulated the conflict as a characteristic of the very history of the continent. The various ways of understanding the

⁴ Florestan Fernandes affirms that the alteration in colonial dependency bonds and the change of the hegemonic pole from the Portuguese to the English did not allow changes in significant social structures, the changes were "abrupt, disorderly, but under conditions of relative optimism and a certain intensity, thus constituting a new and modern economic sector, assembled and directed, directly or at a distance, by interests and foreign organizations". (See Fernandes 2008:25).

theological production would be organized from the conflict between social classes present in Latin America. *Within the dependent and uneven capitalist process theologies would be managed according to viewpoints determined by the positions of social actors.* Concerning the academic and ecclesiastical field, Liberation Theology resulted from new settings. Dussel states that there was an anteposition of *European Developmental Theology* related to *Liberation Theology*. The European and North American theology understood the world only from the center, forgetting the suburbs. Its world was not the world as a whole; it left out of its reflection the production of the poor, of the marginalized, of women and indigenous peoples, in short, of the oppressed minorities.

Latin American theology, as part of a larger field – the humanities, was also transformed by social events and contributed to a reading of a *Liberation Christianity* (Löwy 2000) in which it interpreted the result of a theoretical-conflictual form of the underdeveloped society, namely the interpretation of Dependency Theory as a theological place/space (*Locus Theologicus*) peculiar to the hermeneutic method (de Souza 2015). This interpretation came from the theological approach to results of social sciences and less from an analysis of data and statistics that had been achieved over the last 30 years and of the growth expectations, especially with Juscelino Kubitschek's government's Target Plan, 1956 and 1961 (Fernandes 2008:12-13).

4. Dependency Theory

Within the analysis of totality, Latin America was constituted in the European denial produced by Latin America itself, that is, the European *non being* denied by policies of transference of the *plus-valia* of the peripheral, underdeveloped nations, to the center, developed nations. By means of this denial, Latin American reality was marked by an authoritarian leadership and the National Security Doctrine (Comblin 1975), powered by bourgeois-liberal elites who were linked to foreign capital through multinational enterprises. It is from this contextuality that new Christologies came to be reasoned and articulated. As Assmann affirms, “the conflict of Christologies cannot be analyzed or resolved away from the dialectic of socio-political conflicts, which has always been its real historical conditioning” (Assmann 1970:37).

Latin American contextuality marked the new Christological development. *Underdevelopment* and *Dependency* theories have profoundly marked the new theology at the end of the 1960s. After nearly 30 years of Developmentalism, new data and statistics available to intellectuals began to be analyzed more critically. From 1930 to 1960, Brazil experienced a huge economic and social growth (Velloso and Villela 2008)⁵. However, the country still faced a cruel dilemma: namely the eco-

⁵ In 1968, Brazil grew at an extraordinary rate of 8% per year.

conomic and social inequality was still outrageous. The country grew at high rates, consolidating itself as one of the most notable economies of the continent, but could not solve its internal contradictions, considering itself to be the metatheory of Developmentalism as an explanatory argument (Martins 2011). This theory would say that in order for a country to become developed it had to increase domestic savings rate and enable the creation of conditions for attracting such resources (Furtado 2008:106-107). Furtado explains that the idea of development has a fundamentally economic angle, ignoring the aspirations of groups - conflicting or not - that constitute society. He states that the theory:

[...] points to the simple transplant of industrial civilization, this is conceived as a material lifestyle originated outside the historical context of the country concerned. The ideal conditions for this transplant can be confused with social immobility: population is seen by the agents of the industrialization process as a mass of productive resources framed in the laws of markets. An important extension of this ideology is the authoritarianism doctrine as a political system more suitable for late industrializing societies. Only the authoritarian framework could create the ideal conditions for a rapid transplant of industrial techniques and simultaneously intensify accumulation. Political activity is now seen as an oriented effort to reduce the resistance of social structures to the penetration of techniques peculiar to the industrial civilization. Authoritarianism, instrument for achieving higher stages of accumulation, tends to lose its rationale at a later stage of development. In this case as well the evolution of productive forces is presented as a catapult to achieve social forms considered superior [...] (Furtado 2008:108).

The disenchantment with this metatheory allowed the emergence of analyses which were more peculiar to the Latin American reality (Silva 1998:48.). When considering sociological changes and the theological interpretation, Negre Rigol affirms that:

In order for society with all its contradictions and provocations to become a theological and hermeneutical place par excellence, it is necessary to consider the relation between social order and sociology. Let us start by stating that every human is an unconscious sociologist and the social fact and society are never immediate data to humankind, but it will come interpreted. This collective interpretation (within groups, classes and countries) considers the same essence of the social field and how individuals live in society, change it or adapt it, and is also the key to understanding its political and historic projection for or against the future of humankind. Latin American sociology approaches today, on a more conscious level, this option and commitment as inseparable from its working method. Sociology of knowledge finally becomes sociology of knowledge of sociology. Furthermore, it believes its last option is not restricted to a change in the speculative method

(from the sociology of the order to the dialectic sociology) or in the theoretical framework (from functionalism to the sociology of conflict) but it wants to reach practice as the last scientific criteria. Liberating praxis as sociological verification is the justification of an experience: humankind can only understand the world when they begin to change it. We must allow the action to have its role in determining the thought. Only then the word becomes action and changes the world (Negre Rigol 1972:182).

The new Latin American sociology took into consideration many aspects of society such as culture, politics, the dominant ideology, economy and levels of education, among others. Negre Rigol states that in this context the liberation of the theological thought from its coloniality became a consequent move against a politization and subversion of conceptual parameters (Negre Rigol 1972:182):

Social sciences become, from this perspective, a valuable weapon in the demystification of religious language, to overcome new magic formulas or ritual slogans of a naive interpretation of reality and put faith and the message in a more scientific and less subjective field. If politics is today the privileged language of theology, sociology must partly replace this language because politics is the morphology and epidermis of socioeconomics (Negre Rigol 1972:183).

Importantly, the immediate context of the elaboration of Liberation Theology is not only the metatheoretical developmentalist misfortune; it is the authoritarian reaction to the projects defended by social movements and by new approaches organized by the National Security Doctrine. Furtado affirms that the authoritarianism doctrine of the 1930s rises strongly in civil-military coups throughout the post-World War II period, in the core of the Cold War (Furtado 2011:108). Within this situation, Negre Rigol states that the stage of change in which social sciences had arrived allowed inferences that set the future in between fascism or socialism.

It is worth noting that *Dependency Theory* did not have a single conceptual perspective, it was not a monolithic theoretical elaboration; on the contrary, it constituted itself as a multi-faceted construction, whose epistemic approach was creatively polissemic. *Dependency Theory* was formed from theses initially defended by ECLAC, which were harshly criticized, looking for new interpretative routes and political action in the face of the challenges that the incompleteness of the thirty years of great economic growth were bringing to Latin America. After the developmentalist euphoria, Latin American intellectuals questioned why there has been a broad and bourgeois industrialization. *Dependency Theory* emerges to address the dilemma of the non-national industrialization, intending to answer this question. And the intellectuals who have dealt with this question sought to emphasize not only the economic aspects and “print varied hues”, which would avoid any possibility of generalizing this theory as a monolithic discourse (de Souza 2015:170-174.).

5. The interpretation of Dependency Theory by Liberation Theology

In its birth, Liberation Theology has not made the same choice as many social sciences have - sociology, economics, geography, pedagogy and anthropology, among others - that is, to take the empirical data and draw from them its analytical consideration. Theology, however, was guided by *prophetism* as the fundamental element of criticism of the *status quo*, conceptualizing it as a *captivity of the church*. Such captivity would be based on the period of absence of a theological construction characteristic of the colonized and underdeveloped context. According to Leonardo Boff,

[...] the acute awareness of the mechanisms that maintain Latin America in underdevelopment as dependency and domination led it to speak of liberation. This liberation category, relative to the other dependency, articulates a new attitude in coping with the problem of development. [...] The liberation category implies a global rejection of the developmental system and a denunciation of its subduing structure. It is urgent to break the system of dependencies (Boff 1980:17).

It is evident that the denunciation proposal is a practical aspect of theology. It passes from a structural-functionalist and development theology to a theology that makes the scheme *denunciation-proclamation* its most relevant aspect based on a *pastoral* proposal that has in the concrete reality its epistemic justification.

According to Dussel, European theology, though it is imbued with a consequent criticism of the *status quo*, so evident in the ideological struggle against the fascist tendencies of the first half of the twentieth century (Bonhoeffer 1968)⁶, has absorbed metaphysics and turned *contextuality* into *universality*. From Enlightenment on, colonial processes were justified through a subject-object and not through a person-person scheme. This promoted the solipsistic sense of individualism, the religious experience of the person capable enough to promote a leap of faith, in Kierkegaardian words (Viallaneix 1977:40).

Liberation theology made its option for the poor, for victims, for impoverished communities in Latin America. The place of the poor was taken as a privileged epistemological place of the theological reflection (MO SUNG 1993:8). This means that such a commitment is connected to the prophetic perception that allows those who elaborate the theological reflection to make an option that is prophetic, that is, an option that is established in preferring the victims of history. *However, these victims are seen from the political-structural and economic point of view, they*

⁶ A symptom of these struggles is the quest for a *new language* about God, created in the midst of Nazi-fascist government in Europe, by Bonhoeffer, a martyr of the modern church in the fight against Hitler's government.

are not abstract poor, but poor in terms of material shortages whose presence leads to spiritual poverty in its broadest cultural meaning.

6. Conclusion

Regarding liberation theology, *dependency* was interpreted as related to *liberation*, that is, the dependency of underdeveloped nations should be opposed by the socio-political liberation to developed nations. As the people of God one day left the *captivity* of Egypt and Babylon, faith communities present in Latin America should follow the *exodus* and break free from the yoke of underdevelopment. The biblical-theological reading of the situation of dependency, with all its social and cultural implications, carried out by liberation theologians has linked the economic and political reality of the Latin American continent to the contemporary world of the various phases of the people of Israel's history and especially of Jesus' history. Thus, theological categories like sin, liberation, captivity, freedom, service and love began to be interpreted from a sociological and political perspective.

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