

Pitching the Song in the Crack: the option for the poor and the current political realities

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At the Belfast Harpers' Festival in 1792 the official observers found themselves unable to note down the tunes in the established musical forms. The complex scales fell outside the accepted tonic range. As one observer put it

White notes I found were wrong, so were the black
For you had pitched the song right in the crack.

That the peasant people's music could be more subtle and sophisticated than the establishment could anticipate is itself a liberating sign of hope.

Faced with the question of whether it is possible to develop a 'liberation theology' from within the modern British context, Enoch Powell provides a useful point of metaphorical contact. He once suggested that 'politicians have to give the people a tune to hum'. It does seem that there is a dominant political tune buzzing round Britain today. It has caught on and is commonly hummed in public. In the past those who have stressed the need for change have turned to the notion of 'blueprints'—despite the fact that this kind of future plan is usually two-dimensional and static, and that sometimes the dreams of architects and planners present land and property proposals but block out the people in a kind of 'neutron bomb' model of development. But concentrating on the tune opens up a more dynamic metaphor of process. It is certainly not a question of static futuristic modelling. Neither conforming to the dominating set tune nor simply countering it, but creatively developing new music from 'within the crack', could provide a resilient model.

There have been some major attempts at explicating what has been happening in British society in recent years. In particular the churches have begun to do 'social analyses'. The *Faith in the City* report still provides a major survey of economic and social realities in modern Britain. Many local churches in major cities—some ecumenically—are working hard at examining their own areas in terms of employment, housing, social provision and relationships with minority groups. The concept of the inner city has provided a focus, coupled with the need to tackle the run-down of redundant parishes. But though many of the

analyses, ranging from *Faith in the City* to the Duke of Edinburgh's *Enquiry into Housing*, examine the economic realities (i.e. the 'material' resources) and social relationships, they do not press on to tackle the political or power relationships governing the structures, nor do they fully explore the cultural context which gives these structures meaning and value.

By addressing economic and social issues but evading the political and cultural, any attempt at stimulating a process of liberation is inevitably truncated. Similarly, reducing liberation theology to reading matter or believing that simply translating great works from Spanish into English will provide us with a liberation package for Britain is grossly misleading. Surely the key to the work of 'liberation theology' elsewhere in the world is to understand it as a *method* rooted in a particular situation. Suggestions that liberation theology can be applied to the British context themselves presuppose that we have already got to grips with that context. Without a fuller political and cultural analysis, 'knowing our own situation' cannot be taken as read or for granted.

Professor Halsey (who served on the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission into Urban Priority Areas) provides a key starting point with his comment that

Britain in the twentieth century has lost its empire and its place as the leading industrial economy. But in terms now current in the international press and television what was once a leading, if not the leading world power is now a declining offshore island of Europe with a fate perhaps closer to Portugal or Greece than to the U.S.A.

That loss of Empire is a process that is not yet politically or culturally complete. The poet Ted Hughes remarked that people in the communities in the northern towns of Britain still live under the pall of two World Wars. There is a sense in which the 'Empire remains', and indeed the idea of rekindling it is a dominant motif in Mrs Thatcher's approach. She sees her task in terms of restoring Britain's greatness, despite the fact that Britain no longer has a place at the same table as Reagan and Gorbachev. The Falklands episode provided a powerful siren-call to take up the flag-waving again, while imperialist undercurrents of hostility to still-called 'immigrants' find popular ventilation. The 'Empire' has gone economically and socially; it certainly has not gone politically and culturally.

The journalist Paul Harrison, author of *Inside the Third World*, returned home and published *Inside the Inner City*—a graphic account of the living of the people of Hackney, the poorest borough in Britain, thus switching the focus to the inner city as the site on the receiving end of the economic decisions that have dominated British society since the early 1970s.

Bishop David Sheppard, in his Dimbleby Lecture, chose as his theme 'Divided Britain', distinguishing 'poor Britain' from 'comfortable Britain' and strikingly reintroducing a neo-Disraelian view of British society. The verb ought to be active. Britain is increasingly dividing. Britain in the late 1980s, with its population of 55.5 million, is a dividing society, increasingly divided into the employed and the unemployed. A society of wealth as well as widespread poverty, it is geographically dividing North/South, inner city/suburb, and is increasingly partitioned by sex, class and race. Wealth is as unevenly distributed in Britain today as it was a hundred years ago. The top 25% of the adult population own 84% of all wealth, the top 50% own 94%. 1% of its population still owns one fifth of all Britain's personal wealth, including three-quarters of the private land and company shares. The poorer half of the population is left with only 6% of the total wealth between them. In December the Central Statistical Office published the first survey of personal incomes for three years. It reveals that those who earn more than £19,270 a year have raised their share of post-tax income from 23.4% to 26.5% between 1978/79 and 1984/85, which in practice means that they keep more of their income after tax than the entire bottom half of the population. The wealthiest 1%—some 200,000 tax payers who earn over £60,000 a year—had, on average, increased their take-home income by some £17,500 a year since 1979. In reality their take-home pay is now on average eighteen times larger than that of the low-paid worker. That's the fine-print result of tax-cutting budgets.

At the other end of the scale in terms of income, 30% of the population—16.4 million at the last official count—are on or below the officially recognised poverty line of supplementary benefit level.

Many of the poor are unemployed and living in the worst housing, locked into the inner cities. At the same time there has been a redistribution of income through the tax system which has favoured those with highest incomes. The tax cuts which the Treasury has effected since 1979 have proportionally gone to the wealthiest and in practice the changes to the tax and social security system in recent years have actually widened the division between the rich and the poor in our society. Those in low-paid work, as the Low Pay Unit regularly demonstrates, see their earnings fall steadily year by year. Furthermore, a government-commissioned survey of the living standards of those on supplementary benefit showed that 50% of the families with children ran out of money most weeks. This was reinforced by the London Weekend television programme 'Breadline Britain', whose survey has been published and documented in *Poor Britain*. In other words, forty years after the establishment of the welfare state, poverty in Britain remains endemic and increasing, primarily as a result of high unemployment, a shift to a low-wage economy, and the reduction of the social security support

systems.

An increasing awareness of the fact of widespread poverty has provided the starting point for the classic works of liberation theology. It developed on the basis of raising questions about poverty and wealth in particular societies. What is significant in this development is the process of how poverty itself became an issue, because this provides a useful point of contact with the British situation.

That some 30% of the British population is increasingly in poverty and that the rest are comfortable and are becoming wealthier than ever, is not yet a commonly accepted view of reality in our society. The poor are regularly pilloried in the media as 'scroungers' and relegated to a marginal residue. The victims themselves are blamed for their own fate. In the face of this there is now conflict, the conflict associated with any poverty-wealth analysis of Britain.

Addressing that conflict means examining the context of Britain facing a third term of Conservative Government. It is not the case that the Conservatives are settling back on their past achievements. They are pressing on with their radical agenda. Having got the economy sorted out, as they see it, they are now embarking on tackling the 'social agenda'. We are confronted by a classic mechanistic materialism associated with a strategy which proposes 'Get the economy right and all will follow.' But what is notable in the Conservative version is the withdrawal from key areas of responsibility. Challenged with high unemployment in Cleveland, Mrs Thatcher asserted that there are no magical solutions. This view that residual unemployment is 'inevitable' is a new gloss on Adam Smith's 'invisible hand'. Unemployment, or the generation of new employment, is not regarded as the Government's particular responsibility.

The real agenda is to push forward the 'Social Market', a concept that was spelt out in a Centre for Policy Studies pamphlet in 1974 with a forward by Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher. The rising New Right are determined to break what is now regarded as the post-war political consensus upon which was built the welfare state, the national health service, public housing provision and the education system, thus pushing the theory of free market forces into areas of social policy, previously regarded in our political context as common services provided from the common treasury. The current agenda of eighteen Government Bills, most of which deal with reforming education, housing, local government, health provision and social security policies, is the heaviest Parliament has faced for a generation.

Freeing the market is the political priority. As one Conservative M.P. said in a recent television discussion programme, 'There is really no such thing as poverty in Britain—people are now provided for by the magic of the market'. This view was recently reflected in comments such

as 'If there are any poor people left, then they will provide occasions for private charity for those so inclined.' The revision of the social security system (including the Social Fund) coupled with the Poll tax, which will make the poor pay the price; the withdrawal of unemployment benefit from groups of young and older workers, are all indicative of policy decisions that are shifting against the poor.

Not only will they personally pay the price for these decisions but they are expected to do more for themselves, to exercise personal responsibility for their fate.

The introduction of the social market economy is coupled with an approach to local government that singles out inner city (usually Labour) local authorities. As Mrs Thatcher put it, in her interview 'Vision for 2000' in the *Financial Times*, she looks forward to local businessmen re-establishing the Victorian traditions of merchants running the big cities. The encouragement of local elites to replace locally elected representatives goes hand in hand with the strategy to withdraw central government financial support to local authorities, to increase central government (Ministerial) interference and to leave local authorities collecting the poll tax and administering the social fund. Passing the social fund across to local social services departments will mean that the inner city poor will be taken out of the national budget responsibility. They will be referred back to the local 'city-state'. The 'poor-law' 'parish-relief' system will be effectively reinstated.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer regularly repeats his Autumn Budget statement that the 'British economy is sounder than it has been at any time since the War'. Predicting 'strong economic growth' in the coming year, the economic priority remains that of reducing the rate of personal income tax. There has of course in the last decade been a major structural shift in the economy not simply from employment to unemployment but from manufacturing to the service sector (both public and private) and to the development of financial markets. Wealth is now regarded as generated by financial exchanges ('invisible' transactions) rather than by manufacturing production. This has been characterised as a shift to the 'casino economy', but it also masks a shift to the development of part-time, temporary and low-paid work in the service sectors. It is this division of Britain into those who benefit from the casino economy and those expected to survive in the twilight of the low-wage temporary sector that characterises the latest structural divisions in the British economy.

Sources of the New Right approach have been traced back to the provocative writings of Hayek. He regards freeing the market as releasing a new 'individualism'. But he interestingly presents his case in traditional terms of idols, viz:

The fundamental attitude of true individualism is one of humility towards the processes by which mankind has achieved things which have not been designed or understood by any individual and are indeed greater than individual minds.

This new 'individual' is set against any concepts of the common interest, the social good, or collective provision, which in turn become pejorative words of the 'consensus' past. But what appears is the new idol: the individual enshrined on the altar of 'freed market'.

But as a social philosophy pushing pure individualism works through in practice as selfish interest and private greed, a society develops in which people become individualised and atomised. The isolated elderly, the unemployed who return home and effectively lock themselves in, are typical individuals broken by the worship of the free market.

How, though, is this new ideology to be challenged? Economically, the Government considers the policies are a success that share ownership and tax cuts deliver private wealth. Socially, the 30% poor in our society are largely locked into inner city areas and are being forced to look to restricted local government for assistance that cannot be provided. Politically, Mrs Thatcher aggressively announced on election night 'the inner cities ... we want them next time'. Given the electoral geography of Britain, it is clear that even if the poor were to build up a solid amount of political support, the 30%—70% division which is reflected on the political map means that in principle, under the British democratic system, the self-interested and rich could vote for their tax relief and mortgage tax relief, and vote the poor out. Unlike in the Latin American world, where the poor banding together in solidarity could form an obvious majority to challenge democratically, and take power from, the ruling elite, and win on solidarity of numbers, in Britain the poor remain a significant but solid minority.

Tackling this economic and social division involves probing deeper into questions regarding the distribution in our society not only of wealth and income, but also of power. But asking who has or where is the power that organises economic and social structures leads one further into questions regarding what sustains this power by conferring meaning and value on it.

The cultural critic Raymond Williams writes in *Toward 2000* that the settled pessimism of so much of the culture of the late twentieth century is in effect an absolute loss of the future, of any significant belief that it can be different and better.

A powerful reinforcement of this pessimism was captured in Mrs Thatcher's political slogan 'there is no alternative'. A dominating fear of economic insecurity has become a prime motivation for individual

action. But the claim that ‘there is no alternative’ really attempts to shut down the future, to preclude future options, preserving the present status quo. Are we not entitled to ask is there really no alternative to the current course of dividing Britain into poor and rich? Are there no other ways of organising our material resources, our social relationships or our power? Must we accept this counsel of despair? How on earth is the Gospel ‘Good News’ to be read in this situation? At first sight it would seem that a mechanistic future of ‘no alternative’ is a profoundly anti-biblical notion, challenged by an alternative vision that people can make their future. That is the hallmark of biblical tradition.

But it is not only our politics and culture that need reappraising. As Bonino reminds us:

It would be easy to embrace the idealistic fallacy that since the Gospel is the revelation of God’s purpose for humankind, we can directly derive from the Gospel a political ethics, or, even worse, a political ideology and programme. We may think we can dig up from our Christendom past some ‘social doctrine’, dust it off and refurbish it and offer it as a solution to our present problems. Like a spiritual ‘superman’, religion dashes to the rescue of our stranded ‘societies’.

Reading the Gospel and doing theology itself leads us into conflict about the analysis of our society, and there is not a clear set of values easily accessible to enable us to handle that conflict. The emphasis in the liberation method is on ‘doing the theology’. If, as the Conference at Puebla suggested, this involves the Church in ‘denouncing where the mystery of iniquity is at work through deeds and structures that prevent more fraternal participation in the construction of society and in the enjoyment of the goods that God created for all’, that will lead us into conflict with the prevailing ideologies. What we are doing will come up against the cynicism (most representative in the media) that prefers not to decide and pretends to put itself above the conflict. Facing up to conflict is not a task the Church in our society readily takes up. Too often ‘conflict’ is read threateningly as ‘violence’.

Certainly any biblical analysis rooted in God calling a ‘people’ to become brothers and sisters—the central theme brilliantly spelt out in Thomas Worden’s seminal work *The Psalms are Christian Prayer*—renews concept of ourselves as ‘a people’. Professor Halsey pointed to this when he commented, in his introduction to the study *Poor Britain*,

society means a shared life. If some and not others are poor then the principles on which life is shared are at stake. Society itself is in question.

Our society is therefore certainly in question and it ought to be added that, in what is no longer a bible-reading culture, key resources for

tackling those questions cannot be assumed. Concepts such as ‘a people’ and ‘the poor’ are alien to the ideology of the New Right. Mrs Thatcher has even remarked ‘there is no such thing as society—there are only individuals’, and, anxious to avert theological criticism, she has asserted that the Christian duty is ‘first self-interest’.

Challenging this solidifying ideology of individualism and self-interest—linked to notions of a great Britain reasserting its imperial power under a strong dominating leader—is no small task. Indeed, awareness of the reality of poverty and analyses of the distribution of poverty and wealth are still at early stages, and, within the present British context, commonly regarded as marginal issues.

What is unique about the development of liberation theology in dividing Britain is the challenge to extend the method into a fuller examination of our political and cultural structures whilst remaining aware of the deep-rooted legacy of an Imperial power. That task may well involve the need for exploring new relationships between a declining first-world power and the countries of the two-thirds’ world. Not only may we find common international analyses of the distribution of wealth and power emerge, but also a clearer practical recognition of the need for solidarity between the poor in Britain and the poor in the rest of the world in order to mount a real challenge to the existing international economic and political order.

There are signs of hope around in the contact, whether written or personal, between the bible-reading ‘basic communities’ and church groups among the poor in Britain; in the solidarity-support of workers and tenants groups involved in actions such as ‘boycotts’; in, say, the presence of a group of Chilean exiles singing and then explaining their liberation songs to a pensioners’ club in the heart of a large council estate in Leeds; in the real hope—celebrating the new world which will burst through the struggle—that is tangible in contact with brothers and sisters visiting from Soweto. The tunes are pitched in the crack.

Finally, as one visitor to Leeds from El Salvador remarked:

I find the Western world pessimistic yet arrogant. You gave us capitalism and now some of you believe since that’s wrong you’ve found the answer and want to give us that. Why can’t you see—might it not be *us* who liberate *you*?