



Liberation Theology and Catholic Social Teaching

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Abstract

This article argues for a broad compatibility between the Theology of Liberation and Catholic Social Thought. It can be argued that both of these discourses have been eclipsed in the post-conciliar period by the attention given to sexual ethics rather than the 'social question'. Two possibilities are put forward as to how these discourses may re-connect with contemporary political and economic debates. Firstly, the notions of the 'State of Exception' and the *homo sacer* (advanced by Giorgio Agamben) have opened up new space for theological reflection centred upon the victim. Secondly, the search for a post-Rawlsian account of global justice, such as we find in the work of Amartya Sen, offers a possible version of a political 'project', to which both Liberation Theology and Catholic Social Thought can contribute.

Keywords

Theology of Liberation; Giorgio Agamben; State of Exception; Amartya Sen; global justice.

The capacity for Latin American liberation theology to be an irritant to the official Catholic Church remains undimmed. The proposed *Congreso Continental de Teologia* at Unisinos, Sao Leopoldo in Brazil, to celebrate forty years of liberation theology, will take place from 8th to 11th October 2012 – exactly one year before the Pope is due to come to Brazil for World Youth Day. By this careful chronology, two visions of Church (and how the Church should relate to the modern world) are being brought into explicit counterpoint.

An assessment of the overall health of Liberation Theology will no doubt be easier after this event. This article will attempt an interim diagnosis, arguing in the process for a broad compatibility between CST and the Theology of Liberation – not least because they both suffer from the marginalisation of evangelically-directed social discourse within the contemporary Church.

We may demonstrate this marginalisation by means of a thought-experiment. Let us imagine that it is 1964 and that we are in the council chamber during session three of the Second Vatican Council. We, the Council fathers, are being asked to approve draft chapters of what will eventually become the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. All is going smoothly: we are considering Chapter Three on ‘Socio-economic Life’, with an attempt to set out ‘certain principles governing socio-economic life as a whole’.

Then, things start to get tense. We are presented with a text asserting ‘the universal destination of earthly goods’. The text reads: ‘God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and peoples. Thus, under the leadership of justice and in the company of charity, created goods should be in abundance for all in like manner’. While recognising a diversity of customs and contexts regarding property rights, the draft nevertheless insists upon this commonality, to the extent that ‘anyone in extreme necessity has the right to procure for himself what he needs out of the riches of others’. The proponents of the draft insist on the consistent witness of Church tradition, both ancient and modern, citing patristic support from St Augustine and St Basil, as well as Lactantius, St Gregory the Great, St Thomas Aquinas, St Bonaventure and St Albert, right up to *Mater et Magistra*, not only with regard to the provisionality of property rights, but even for the extreme claim that failure to feed the hungry man is equivalent to homicide: ‘in extreme necessity all goods are common, that is, all goods are to be shared’.

In the end, no agreement on this issue can be reached, and the matter is referred to the Pope for further consideration. The Pope is well aware of the dilemma. Either the traditional teaching must be upheld, in all its patristic and magisterial authority – but this would set the Church at odds with capitalist modernity. Alternatively, the teaching must be substantially modified so as to acknowledge contemporary economic and political realities. After several years’ consultation and still no unanimity, the Pope decides to issue an encyclical. Given the life or death gravity of the matter under discussion, he calls the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*

We can only speculate about what our Church might now look like, if the neuralgic issue placed under the gaze of the world’s spotlight in 1968 had been the so-called ‘social question’, and not reproductive ethics. But it is the latter that, for good or ill, has dominated post-Conciliar life and thought. To this extent the more explicitly social dimension of the gospel, testified to by both Catholic Social Teaching and by the Theology of Liberation, indeed remains our ‘best-kept secret’, perhaps better described as our ‘best-buried secret’.

In terms of the radical edge to this discourse – the ‘universal destination of earthly goods’ asserted in *Gaudium et Spes* 69 – we have not so much a buried treasure, as an elephant in the room. Both

Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology articulate – one implicitly, the other more explicitly – a fundamental incompatibility between the priorities of a capitalist economy and the imperatives of the Christian gospel. *In extremis*, the needs of the poor have priority over the appropriative desires of the wealthy.

What, then, are these ‘exceptional circumstances’ and who defines them? Contemporary political philosophical exploration of the notion of the ‘State of Exception’ may help in the identification of such circumstances. It may also be possible to differentiate the contribution of Liberation Theology from that of Catholic Social Thought by means of the same concept. One might argue that the two discourses are proclaiming the same message under different circumstances. Just as the compound H₂O has the same chemical make-up despite performing very differently at different temperatures, so the ‘State of Exception’ might correspond to the volatility of water as it reaches, then exceeds, boiling point.

This notion of the Theology of Liberation as the articulation of a ‘State of Exception’ will be the first of two possibilities put forward as ways of reintegrating both liberationist thinking and CST into contemporary discussion on the political and economic order. A second way forward concerns the new wave of reflection upon global justice, stimulated to some extent by John Rawls in his 1999 book *The Law of Peoples*, as well as attempts to go beyond Rawls, such as we find in Amartya Sen’s recent work *The Idea of Justice* (2009). The refinement of our understanding of justice to which this literature testifies runs parallel to the alleged ‘paradigm shift’ in the Theology of Liberation, whereby a narrow ‘modernist’ focus upon socio-economic justice has been amplified to include a ‘thick’ description of cultural and spiritual well-being. The possibility of ‘global’ justice – explicitly considered by Rawls and Sen as a ‘realistic utopia’ – acknowledges also the globalised perspectives which are now much more evidently in operation since the heyday of Liberation Theology. Perhaps the most dramatic example is the internationalisation of processes of justice for human rights atrocities, with the trials of perpetrators in El Salvador and Chile creating new contexts for transitional and post-transitional justice in these and other countries. Among other things, such developments raise the question of how we are to conceive of ‘subsidiarity’ in a new globalised context.

We begin with an account of Liberation Theology as an articulation of a ‘State of Exceptionality’. As has been well documented, this theological style emerged in a situation in which the majority of the population of Latin America found themselves subjected to chronic economic oppression, political exclusion, and massive and violent abuse of human and civil rights. Beginning with Brazil in 1964, most countries of the region fell under the thrall of nationalist military dictatorships, in power to protect the interests of the richer sectors

of society against the perceived threat of socialist insurrection. For this reason, of course, the *juntas* won considerable backing from the United States, whose authorities were able to justify this exceptional state of affairs with reference to the doctrine of 'National Security'.¹

The term 'State of Exception' is elusive, as its most prominent theorist Giorgio Agamben acknowledges in *State of Exception* (2005). For our purposes it can be summarised in three theses. The first is that there is a profound paradox, addressed in the modern era by the German political jurist Carl Schmitt, at the heart of any attempt to legislate for, i.e. give a legal basis for, an exceptional state of affairs. A 'state of emergency', understood as a suspension of legal norms, must by definition lie outside or beyond the law, and therefore cannot be legislated for. This paradox is not peripheral to politics, but constitutive of it, as in Schmitt's well-known definition of political sovereignty: 'Sovereign is he who can declare the state of exception'.

The second thesis concerns the tendency in contemporary political life for the 'exceptional' to be increasingly incorporated into what is considered normal or acceptable, the standard examples in the current literature being institutions such as Guantánamo Bay, or the practice of 'extraordinary rendition' of terrorist suspects for interrogation. These are the most extreme instances of the many extra-legal curtailments of freedom that have been implemented and tolerated as part of the 'War on Terror'. Since this war cannot ever be satisfactorily concluded, these 'exceptional' states of affairs become and remain normative.

This constitutes a crisis of the political, leading a variety of contemporary theorists to posit a 'theological' moment in politics, by which the conundrum of the 'exception' can be addressed and resolved. Rowan Williams summarises it thus:

The fundamental requirement of a politics worth the name is that we have an account of human action that decisively marks its distance from assumptions about action as the successful assertion of will. If there is no hinterland to human acting except the contest of private and momentary desire, meaningful action is successful action, an event in which a particular will has imprinted its agenda on the 'external' world. Or, in plainer terms, meaning is power; Thrasymachus in the *Republic* was right, and any discourse of justice is illusory.²

The barbarism of the impoverished notion of politics set out here – one which evokes 'the spectre of the purest fascism' – needs to

¹ See David Tombs, *Latin American Liberation Theology* (2002), especially pp. 67–115, and Jeffrey L. Klaiber, *The Church, Dictatorships, and Democracy in Latin America* (1998).

² Rowan Williams, 'Introduction' in Davis, et al (eds.), 2005, *Theology and the Political*, p. 1.

be countered by an alternative understanding of action as *testimony*, which of course gives us the concept of martyrdom.

My hypothesis is that the growth of the Theology of Liberation during the period of dictatorships may fruitfully be understood as an anguished articulation of precisely this failure of the established order. The intolerable situation across a whole continent, of chronic poverty and of massive, systemic human rights abuses, seems to have coincided with a new religious awakening, catalysed by the reforms of Vatican II and their appropriation by the Latin American Bishops (CELAM) at their conference at Medellín in 1968. The notion of an ‘option for the poor’ is grounded in a new appreciation of the ‘exceptionality’ of God’s partisan action in history on behalf of the oppressed. This religious appreciation, combined with political developments such as the socialist revolutions in Cuba and, later, Nicaragua, held out for a whole continent the prospect of a definitive resistance and rejection of the existing political and economic order.

The birth of theology in a liberative key coincides with the discovery in the 1960s of the ‘double-bind’ of developmentalism. As it became clear that the gap between rich and poor was not being healed, optimism gave way to what became known as ‘dependency theory’. Dependency theorists argued that whatever the well-meaning rhetoric of development agencies and governments, such a bridging of wealth was not in fact in the interests of the richer nations. The status of the latter depended on excluding under-developed nations from the table of prosperity by keeping them in a state of permanent marginality or dependence. Hence the double-bind: poorer nations were encouraged to emulate prosperous ones, even as they were systemically prevented from successfully doing so. Hence, also, the change of the economic and political paradigm: from developmental cooperation to radical liberation.

The limitations of dependency theory have been acknowledged by liberation theologians, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, in the later editions of *A Theology of Liberation*. Put very simply, there are many causes of chronic poverty other than systemic oppression of the periphery by a prosperous centre; an over-emphasis on dependency as a cause of deprivation has all too easily become a recipe for post-colonial resentment.

Might it be, however, that the significant paradigm shift is not economic, but ethical and spiritual? There is a powerful moment in the film *Romero*, when the Archbishop is in prison and hears the screams of another prisoner being tortured in an adjacent cell. Romero, totally impotent, cries out repeatedly: ‘We are human beings!’³ This, surely,

³ Whittaker Chambers in his autobiography tells of how a former staunch East German communist came to reject Stalinism because “one night- in Moscow- he heard screams”, thus sweeping away ‘the logic of the mind, the logic of history, the logic of politics,

is one reason why the Exodus narrative plays such an important role in classic liberation theology. It is the story of a God impelled to act, to intervene in history, because he 'hears screams'. Exodus records a limit-situation which is generative and transformative, as evoked by Rowan Williams: here is a counter-witness to an understanding of politics as the untrammelled assertion of will. The Exodus from Egypt is the prelude to the gift of Torah and communal identity at Mount Sinai; it is also, of course, the type of Christ's Passover, as the Church explicitly asserts every year at the Easter vigil.

Does this justify theologians arguing for Exodus as a 'lasting paradigm'? A special number of *Concilium* in 1987 urged precisely this, with Enrique Dussel, Gregory Baum, José Severino Croatto and David Tracy, among others, arguing for the special significance to be accorded to this extraordinary narrative.⁴ Their advocacy contrasts with the denunciation of John Howard Yoder, who as early as 1973 was describing Liberation Theology as a passing fad, and taking issue in particular with what he saw as an abuse of the Exodus narrative (Yoder, 1973). Yoder argued instead for the priority of the image of the Babylonian Exile as a paradigm for Christian political self-understanding. What his argument fails to acknowledge is that in the Exodus narrative the people of Israel confront an increasingly intolerable situation, whereas the challenge for the Israelites in Babylon is precisely the opposite: how to maintain their communal identity and religious fidelity in a context which is traumatic and disorienting, for sure, but not unbearable.

Perhaps the 'Exodus or Babylon' options can serve as symbols of Liberation Theology and CST respectively. The latter appeals to a normative vision of social and political well-being: one which acknowledges the need for compromise and accommodation with secular realities, while insisting that the common good must ultimately be underwritten by divine transcendence. On the whole, CST regards the capitalist system as capable of humanisation and reform. The model of Babylonian captivity, with all its ambivalence and the need for discernment, does indeed underlie much Christian reflection on the political, not least Augustine's classic doctrine of the 'Two Cities'.

To take this route would be to argue that Liberation Theology does not in fact offer a positive political vision, and should not be expected to provide one. It originates as a Mosaic protest against and confrontation with 'exceptional' situations: for Egypt, read Brazil, Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, where over several decades

the myth of the 20th century, with five annihilating words'. Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (Random House, N.Y., 1952) p. 14.

⁴ Anton Weiler (ed.), 'Exodus: a Lasting Paradigm', *Concilium* 189 (1987); in this volume see Gregory Baum, 'Exodus Politics', pp.109–117, and David Tracy, 'Exodus: Theological Reflection', pp. 118–124.

political and economic dysfunction excluded any realistic immediate prospect of forging the common good. Preliminary to any kind of constructive political ideal, Liberation Theology addresses and speaks on behalf of the non-person, whom Agamben calls *homo sacer*, the human being in his raw, unprotected, apolitical state. (Agamben, 1998).

Liberation Theology is first and foremost a lyric, prophetic cry of denunciation. Its proponents have often contrasted their theological agenda with that of the North, claiming that the challenge of ‘Godlessness’ is not philosophical atheism, but the denial of God that takes place when humanity, God’s image and likeness, is defaced or eradicated. It is worth remembering that the 500-year memory of Liberation Theology, its ‘*anteayer*’ [day before yesterday], includes the sixteenth-century arguments about the human status of the native Indians, affirmed in Pope Paul III’s bull *Sublimus Dei* in 1537, and about the justifiability of their enslavement, debated by Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Sepúlveda in Valladolid in 1550–1551. From the moment of its ‘discovery’, the Latin American continent has presented itself as a problematic ‘state of exception’.

If this approach is correct, then a number of the difficulties and misunderstandings which have opened up over the years may be better appreciated, if not resolved. Was it ever fair to ask Liberation Theology to yield an alternative political or social vision; or does it rather address, in the name of the gospel imperative, *aporias* within our understanding of the political as such? If this is so, then it is time to stop criticising Liberation Theology for not being something else, much as one might be exasperated with a screwdriver for not being a hammer.

One can cite a number of examples of liberation theologians revising earlier, arguably hubristic positions. We have already noted a nuancing with regard to dependency theory as a guiding economic paradigm. Its vitiated success as an economic theory, however, does not negate the power of this paradigm on another level: as critique of a system of ‘dependency’ that does indeed demand spiritual subservience, in the forms of idolatrous worship and sacrifices. A second example of a new humility concerns the understanding of precisely who are the ‘agents’ of liberation. One of the earliest theologians of liberation, Hugo Assmann, offers an interesting *mea culpa* in this respect. Writing in 1997, Assmann effectively retracts his earlier exhortations to the poor to become the ‘subjects’ of history: for example in an edited collection from 1972 which declared the oppressed people to be the ‘Lord of History’.⁵ Assmann now admits that such an assignation can be patronisingly dismissive of the actual situation of

⁵ Hugo Assmann (ed), *Pueblo oprimido, señor de la historia* (Montevideo, Tierra Nueva, 1972).

poor people, and at worst is a form of idolization. The poor are asked to assume responsibility for their own liberation as well as that of the liberation theologians themselves, and ultimately of their oppressors. Anointing the poor as ‘historical subjects’, though intended to dignify and empower them, paradoxically amounted to yet another way in which they were excluded and objectified.⁶

Finally, a third area of critique: the question of freedom, which is, after all, the *telos* of liberation; and yet is in many ways the Achilles’ heel of Liberation Theology. It lies at the heart of the Vatican critiques of Liberation Theology in 1984 and 1986, which regarded the liberationist vision as reductionist in its reliance on Marxist ideology. The second of the two Instructions from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1986) attempted a description of Christian freedom allegedly more in line with orthodox Christian tradition. Stanley Hauerwas casts a cold eye over the concept of ‘freedom’ in Gustavo Gutiérrez, while the Belgian theologian, José Comblin in *Called to Freedom* (1997) regrets the earlier tendency of veteran liberation theologians like himself to devote too much attention to the process of liberation, rather than the actuality and ambiguities of freedom and liberty. For Comblin, Liberation Theology must aim for a theologically articulated project, focussed on the freedom of the person in community. Such a priority would enable Liberation Theology to recover the sense of a defining and unifying vision or blueprint for its socio-analytical mediation, a vital ingredient missing since 1989.

These refinements, from Gutiérrez, Assmann and Comblin, demonstrate the capacity of Liberation Theology at its best to be self-reflective and self-correcting. What the preceding sections have attempted to argue is that a framing of liberationist concerns within the context of a particular theme from political philosophy – namely, the ‘State of Exception’ and its paradoxical relation to the political order – may help to contextualise the real or alleged *aporias* of Liberation Theology. It helps us to recognise, for example, a perfectly understandable decline in effective engagement as countries across the Latin American continent returned to varying degrees of democratic and civil normality. A theology which is grounded on the non-person, the victim, will inevitably feature less prominently in a ‘normalised’ context. The complex reality of transitional justice is a classic example, where the rights of victims and their families have to be balanced against other goods: truth, reconciliation, a deepening and consolidation of democratic institutions and processes – all of

⁶ This reassessment by Assmann should not be allowed to overshadow the examples of genuine political empowerment: see John Burdick, *Legacies of Liberation: the Progressive Catholic Church in Brazil* (Ashgate, UK, 2003).

which may involve amnesties and compromises that, of necessity, 'marginalise' the voice of the victim once again.

Yet again, a screwdriver is not a hammer. If we look to Liberation Theology for a fully-articulated normative political vision, the thinness of its descriptions soon become apparent. On the other hand, if we see it more as a *pre*-political moment, a prophetic witness to a transcendent dimension before or within politics, and in the absence of which all our political arrangements tend towards the 'purest fascism', perhaps we are closer to a true appreciation of its importance and its rich legacy.

Yet the prophetic function does not finish with denunciation. A positive, nourishing vision must also be attempted. Hence the second area where a revitalisation of Liberation Theology and CST may be expected, namely the renewed attempts to formulate principles of cosmopolitan justice. The debate here is inescapably shaped by the work of John Rawls, not only with his magisterial work *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, but also *The Law of Peoples*, which was published in the same year as Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* – 1999. More recently, Sen has written *The Idea of Justice* (2009) as an attempt to go beyond the well-rehearsed limitations of Rawls' approach. The possibility of a cosmopolitan account of global justice, one that is nevertheless respectful of national and local autonomy and identities, is very much a live one. Rawls and Sen seek to identify the conditions for a 'realistic utopia', achievable over the next twenty years. An engagement with such an enterprise on the part of liberation theologians would surely fulfil the requirement of a 'historical project' that Ivan Petrella insists is necessary for the continued viability of Liberation Theology.

Conclusion

I am all too aware that there is little about my personal life-style or my background as a theologian which authorises me to be a spokesperson for the Theology of Liberation. In particular, I fall well short of the ideal of the organic intellectual that such a form of theology envisages. Nevertheless, I have attempted in all humility to suggest a number of ways in which the complementarity and synergy between Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology may be explored. This is less a matter of listing the points at which they agree or diverge; rather, it is to propose that certain contemporary philosophical and economic discourses offer an opportunity for both CST and Liberation Theology, for different reasons seen as marginal discourses, to be brought in from the cold.

Firstly, the notion of the 'State of Exception', building on Giorgio Agamben's elaboration of the concept of *homo sacer*, provides a

possible way of clarifying Liberation Theology's unique contribution, and of explaining some of the *aporias* identified by both its proponents and its critics. This in turn helps to clarify how Liberation Theology might relate to CST. Secondly, the renewed discussion of global or cosmopolitan justice, insofar as it builds upon but goes beyond the classical but problematic formulation of justice by John Rawls, permits and invites renewed conversation about an achievable 'realistic utopia'. Let me recap and embellish by means of five concluding theses:

1. Rather than looking to Liberation Theology as a blueprint for a normative political vision, we should think of it as a prophetic discernment of the 'State of Exception'. Liberation Theology's addressee is the human being as 'pre-political' *homo sacer*, existing under the condition of 'bare life'. Here is the mistake, acknowledged by Hugo Assmann, of summoning this figure to be both individually and collectively a 'subject of history'. This may be correct in identifying the exclusion from political existence that typifies the *homo sacer* and seeking to redress it. Nevertheless, the summons is uselessly counter-productive, insofar as it is addressed to people with no realistic immediate prospect of political empowerment.
2. The category of 'the poor' appears to require downgrading in a number of respects, and not just the recognition that it is inappropriate to crown 'the poor' as the agents of history. They cannot, after all, be conceived exclusively as a socio-economic class, such as the proletariat, who will serve as the motor of history. Jon Sobrino (in *Ensayo desde las Víctimas*) has proposed the category of the 'victim' as a more appropriate designation of this privileged *locus theologicus*. However, this is theologically contentious, as we see both in the official condemnation of Sobrino's work and in the fraternal spat between the Boff brothers in 2007–8 over precisely this issue, among others. Briefly, Clodovis has come to agree with Vatican officials that such a description amounts to an idolisation of the poor. Christ may lead us to the poor, but there is no guarantee that an option for the poor will lead to Christ. For Leonardo, on the other hand, to abandon this tenet would amount to an outright betrayal of Liberation Theology.
3. The continued viability of Liberation Theology depends on the recognition and successful negotiation of one or a number of 'paradigm shifts' (de Schrijver, 1998). Liberation Theology has become a 'theological classic' in the sense used by David Tracy. With this comes the danger of appropriation, as the language and concepts of Liberation Theology become common currency, even in the halls of the Vatican and the International

Monetary Fund. Such appropriation runs the danger of Liberation Theology's insights being domesticated. More generally, one of the key non-theological quandaries is whether and to what extent it should adapt to a transformed post-Marxist context, including an acceptance, however grudging, of market capitalism. (We may note, specifically, the shift from outright denunciation of the market to a critique of 'idolisation' of the market in the writings of Hugo Assmann).

4. If Liberation Theology is to be understood first and foremost as testimony and if it is to resist domestication, then the perspective of the victim must remain central to its discourse. The base communities' veneration of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the other martyrs, the cry of *presente!* on behalf of those who are dead or disappeared, are vivid examples of this prioritisation. In this respect, the way in which the liberationist perspective was dismantled in the preparations for the meeting of CELAM at Santo Domingo in 1992 is especially dispiriting (see Mich, ch.9). References to martyrs were removed from the preparatory documents, even as the local population were relocated to make way for the 'commemorative' Columbus lighthouse. Of course, the fact that people have died for a cause can only ever attest to their authenticity, rather than the truth of the cause itself. Nevertheless, this particular piece of revisionism, in the light of the perspective we are offering here, is perhaps more telling than any of the more technical theological objections raised against Liberation Theology.
5. In the light of the above, the relation between the Theology of Liberation and CST may be very crudely stated as follows. CST seeks to envisage a normative vision of political existence, while Liberation Theology puts forward an essential criterion or feature of 'any politics worthy of the name': in its partisanship for *homo sacer*, for the victim who testifies in his or her suffering both to the liberating will of God, and to the literal inhumanity of the political system, which deprives him of anything other than biological existence. It is, one may argue, the task of CST to articulate the notions of freedom and liberty which are absent or under-theorised in Liberation Theology. Contemporary discussions of 'realistic utopia' and cosmopolitan justice will surely have a contribution to make here.

It remains to be asked whether any of this would assist the Council fathers in our fictitious 'thought-experiment'. The insistence of CST upon the 'universal destination of earthly goods' remains: property rights must give way to the needs of the exigent poor. The very fact of this concession at the heart of Catholic teaching is surely significant,

before we try to specify the conditions under which it might be activated. There is here and in recent encyclicals an unequivocal insistence on a *caesura* between the logic of the market, however benign, and the imperative of the gospel.

The liberation theologian must go further, however, insisting that the condition of which *Gaudium et Spes* 69 speaks has come to pass, as a matter of brute historical fact, in the desperate political and economic ‘crucifixion’ of the peoples of the South. It will not suffice to rest in the quandry of George Bernanos’ country priest: ‘Insoluble problem: to give back his rights to the Poor Man without investing him with power’. The liberationist instead concurs with Seamus Heaney in *The Cure at Troy* that ‘once in a lifetime’, exceptionally, the risk of empowerment must be undertaken, for, as Heaney says, while historical reality warns against hoping, once in a lifetime justice demands that history and hope are brought together.

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