

“With what can we compare
the kingdom of God?”

Latin American Liberation Theology and the Challenge of Political Projects

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[Jesus] also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all seeds on earth; and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

Mark 4:30-32

Who baked the pie in the sky? Who sowed and harvested its fruits, gathered the ingredients and put it into the oven? And also: who paved heaven’s streets of gold, crafted the trumpets of the cherubim, and erected God’s throne? Albeit the ethereal tune that marks speculative questions of this nature, there is a profoundly concrete dimension implied in images such as these I just described. Heaven, paradise, kingdom of God: these are theological categories for a reality that demand a ground on which to stand: someone has to bake the pie – even in the sky. Heavenly hopes are intrinsically connected to historical paths in a symbiosis that knows no division.

Liberation theology emerges in Latin America claiming that there is no pie in the sky without pie on earth. The separation between “there” and “here” must be denied: “Christ does not ‘spiritualize’ the eschatological promises,” says Gustavo Gutierrez, “he gives them meaning and fulfillment today.”¹ Salvation is not the going away from history, but it is going beyond the signs of death that mark this very life. Gutierrez continues: “The grace-sin conflict, the coming of the Kingdom, and the expectation of the parousia are also necessarily and inevitably historical, temporal, earthly, social, and material realities.”² Heaven and earth meet in the reign of God, which cannot be separated from the realm where we live our lives in

1 Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 167.

2 Ibid.

the present, on this earth. Because of this theological commitment to the concreteness of God’s reign, liberation theology has taken the task of imagining new societies and critiquing existing ones very seriously. For liberation theology, raising the question of historical projects is a *theological* task necessary for the discernment of God’s liberatory work among people.

With this in mind, this essay will first briefly reconstruct liberation theology’s response to the collapse of the Soviet socialist bloc in Latin America and secondly, moving historically to the first decade of the 21st century, enter in conversation with Ivan Petrella’s work, highlighting his strong call for liberation theology to readdress the task of creating historical projects, something he claims to be lost in the liberation theology movement in the 1990s. Thirdly, I will propose that we are now seeing the emergence of a new historical context for theology, one that no longer fits the two dominant paradigms of the past century defined by the conflict between capitalism and socialism. As I will venture to say, we have witnessed in the past two decades the collapse of the two Walls, namely, the Berlin Wall and Wall Street. The shape of the theology of liberation standing on the ashes of these two great Walls is the ultimate, although incomplete, goal of this essay.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF A PROJECT

Emerging in the heat of the Cold War with its polarization between socialist and capitalist blocs, it is not difficult to identify which side liberation theology preferred. Mexican Bishop Sergio Mendez Arceo states this clearly: “[socialism] is more in accord with the Christian principles of brotherhood, justice, and peace.”³ In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutierrez argues for “a radical break from the status quo” here identified as the “private property system” claiming that such a move would create possibilities for a new society, “a socialist society,” he continues, “or at least allow that such a society might be possible.”⁴ On the global level, liberation theologians were loyal to this ideal and infiltrated the Iron Curtain with declared admiration for the social accomplishments of the socialist countries.⁵ On the ecclesiastical, theological, and political level we sense a clear message in liberation theology: in seeking to discern the social, political, and economic arrangements that allow for God’s reign to flourish in our midst, socialism was the best option.

Given the nature of this partnership with socialism, it is only natural that liberation theology would suffer some changes after the events of 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Recently, two authors have taken the lead in study-

3 Cited in: Ibid., 111.

4 Ibid., 26-27. Clodovis and Leonardo Boff would echo and stress the revolutionary impulse of liberation theology: “The way out of this situation [of poverty and oppression] is *revolution*, understood as the transformation of the bases of the economic and social system.” Clodovis Boff and Leonardo Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, transl. by Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 27.

5 Cf: Frei Betto, “O Socialismo morreu, viva o Socialismo” in: *Tempo e Presença*, v. 12 (252), jul/ago 1990, 17-20. It is also worthwhile noting Betto’s interviews with the Cuban comandante Fidel Castro which became a classic among liberation theologians: *Fidel and Religion: Castro Talks on Revolution and Religion with Frei Betto*, transl. by the Cuban Center for Translation and Interpretation (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

ing, classifying, and critiquing liberation theology's response to the collapse of socialism. These are the Argentinean theologian Ivan Petrella⁶ and the Brazilian theologian Cláudio Ribeiro.⁷ Since both share similar conclusions in their historical approach to Latin American liberation theology (although they take different paths after this initial evaluation⁸), in this section of the essay I will follow Ribeiro's categories and later return to Petrella's approach in the second section of the essay.

In his recently published *A Teologia da Libertação Morreu? Reino de Deus e espiritualidade hoje* [*Has Liberation Theology Died? Kingdom of God and Spirituality Today*], Ribeiro summarizes the debate that took place among Latin American liberation theologians after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Ribeiro recognizes in the first half of the 1990s the "absence of an alternative global project to neoliberalism" and a "perplexity in different fields of knowledge," usually identified as a "paradigm crisis."⁹ In light of this, he traces two distinct movements within liberation theology in response to the collapse of Soviet socialism, namely, one of *continuity* and another of *rupture*.¹⁰ Let us take a close look at these groups.

In the "continuity" group, Ribeiro locates authors like Frei Betto and Leonardo Boff, who fiercely react against the idea that the collapse of "authoritarian state socialism" meant the collapse of "real socialism" and the "hopes for a more human sociability."¹¹ Liberation theology, Boff remarks, "has never opted for Marxism or socialism, but for the poor."¹² What was ruined with the fall of the Berlin Wall was a particular kind of socialism, one marked by an "economic and technocratic flattening."¹³ Betto echoes this question in an important article

6 Ivan Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto* (Aldershot, England/Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004).

7 Cláudio de Oliveira Ribeiro, *A Teologia da Libertação Morreu? Reino de Deus e espiritualidade hoje* (São Paulo: Fonte Editorial, 2010). The initial article that gave birth to this book was published as "Has liberation theology died? Reflections on the Relationship Between Community Life and the Globalization of the Economic System," in: *Ecumenical Review* 51, no. 3 (July 1999): 304-314.

8 After his historical analysis, Ribeiro approaches Paul Tillich's work proposing some theological perspectives for combat against idolatry, especially as they relate to the question of historical projects and God's reign. In the following parts of the essay I will deal with Petrella's meditations on this matter.

9 Ribeiro, *A Teologia da Libertação Morreu?*, 12.

10 Petrella identifies these two groups as "reasserting core ideas" and "critiquing idolatry," respectfully. To these two groups, he adds a third, namely, "revisiting basic categories," in which he includes the work of Pedro Trigo. As this additional approach is also questioning some of liberation theology's "classic" categories and, for this reason, could be read as being part of Ribeiro's "rupture" group, I will not be dealing with Trigo's work here. For Petrella's account of these three groups, see: Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 3-11.

11 Leonardo Boff, "Implosão do Socialismo e Teologia da Libertação," in: *Tempo e Presença*, v. 12 (252), jul/ago 1990, 34-36.

12 Ibid.

13 Leonardo Boff, *Teologia do Cativo e da Libertação* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1980), 130. Such a claim, it is important to recognize, was made almost a decade before the actual collapse of the socialist bloc, which attests to the fact that liberation theology, broadly speaking, was rightly self-critical in its preference for the socialist project.

from 1990: "Liberation theology is not buried under the Berlin Wall because it has never aligned itself with a specific project or party."¹⁴ Although these authors recognize new challenges, it is clear that for them the collapse of the Soviet bloc did not mean the demise of liberation theology nor the need for a revision of the movement's major tenets.

What became necessary in this continuity approach is the dissociation of liberation theology from the Soviet socialist project. As Petrella points out, this is accomplished through the construction of an internal theological nucleus within the liberationist framework that remains intact despite the changes in the broader social order. In this sense, notions like the preferential option for the poor, the Kingdom of God, and the very notion of liberation remain pivotal categories. It is important to recognize and acknowledge the thrust behind this claim: what differentiates liberation theology, says again Betto, is not its political preferences against capitalism, but rather its "method," namely, its choice of "reflection of the faith of the poor from the perspective of the poor."¹⁵ This apparent stubbornness in "reasserting core ideas," Petrella adds in retrospect, is correct.¹⁶ Nevertheless, what is worrisome, according to both Petrella and Ribeiro, is the lack of a clear historical mediation for such concepts.¹⁷ In this sense, even though the "continuation" group was not responsible for a complete assimilation between socialism and God's reign, its difficulty in articulating alternatives to neoliberal capitalism in the 1990s is nonetheless problematic.

In the second group of theologians, those associated with "rupture," Ribeiro identifies a call for the revision of some of liberation theology's initial claims and the inclusion of themes and analysis not present in "mainline" liberation theology in Latin America. Names in this group range from Juan Luis Segundo and Hugo Assmann, to the more recent work of Franz Hinkelammert and Jung Mo Sung.¹⁸ Seeking new tools in the social sciences, especially in the field of economics, this group has tackled the apparent gap between theology and the market economy that liberation theologians left open during the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁹

Within this group we can sense a revision of the continuity group's hopes for a historical irruption of the poor as a new revolutionary subject that would bring

14 Frei Betto, "A Teologia da Libertação ruiu com o Muro de Berlim?", in: *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira*, n. 50 (200), Dez, 1990, 925. Betto continues saying that what liberation theology did account for in relation to the soviet countries were the "social developments" of those nations, capable of eliminating "pockets of abject poverty and the death structures so prevalent in the 'Christian' nations which integrate the capitalist system" (Ibid.).

15 Ibid., 922.

16 Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 4. See, also: 14.

17 Ibid.

18 Cf: Ribeiro, *A Teologia da Libertação Morreu?*, 38-50.

19 See, for example: Jung Mo Sung, *A Idolatria do Capital e a Morte dos Pobres: Uma reflexão Teológica a partir da Dívida Externa* (São Paulo: Edições Paulinas, 1989); and Franz J. Hinkelammert, *Sacrificios Humanos y Sociedad Occidental: Lucifer y la Bestia*. 2nd Edition. (San José, Costa Rica, 1993). The overall theological argument developed in the rupture group is that the free-market economy is based on an idolatrous promotion of sacrifices for the sake of an idol, the capital. This contradicts a basic theological assumption at the core of liberation theology's doctrine of God: God is the God of life who no longer desires sacrifices (Cf: Matt 9:13).

about changes in society.²⁰ Some even suggest the need for liberation theology to consider the historical “weakness”²¹ of the poor instead of the “power” of the poor in history, as Gutierrez first warranted.²² Utopias, whether we frame them in theological terms like the “kingdom of God” as Assmann does²³ or in political terms as the “socialist classless society,” are always transitional categories that require an internal critique – that which Hinkelammert has referred to as a “critique of utopian reason.”²⁴ Sung, for example, has taken this discussion to a new level proposing a reassessment of Christianity’s notion of the “messiah.” For him, what Christianity professes in Jesus Christ is a “defeated liberator-messiah,” which implies that the “strength” of liberation theologies lies not in the historical victories they accumulate but rather in their participation in the struggle for liberation, no matter what the outcome is.²⁵ Historical projects and historical subjects are embraced rather cautiously in order to avoid the triumphalism of a single project which would eventually lead towards the dangerous and idolatrous confinement of God.

With this history in mind, should we assume that liberation theology collapsed together with the Berlin Wall, as the then-cardinal Joseph Ratzinger implied?²⁶ Certainly not. Rather, liberation theology in the 1990s developed a self-critical argument that is important for us today.

“Liberation theology,” Petrella states, “was being rethought to best address the needs of the poor in a new context.”²⁷ Through continuations and ruptures, expansions and deepenings, liberation theology has been changing and it *must* change in order to be the theology of liberation in a transforming world. Libera-

20 Sung confesses to this: “We have to acknowledge that the dream fostered by the base ecclesial communities and by liberation theology, especially in the decades from 1980 to 1990, that the ‘mass’ of Christians in Latin America would take the lead of liberation Christianity... was defeated.” In: *Cristianismo de Libertação: Espiritualidade e luta social* (São Paulo: Paulus, 2008), 16.

21 Ribeiro, *A Teologia da Libertação Morreu?*, 107.

22 Cf: Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, transl. by Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).

23 Assmann states: “There is no perfect construction of the Kingdom in history... The Kingdom that is present among us is only a seed... enough to lead us to embrace the bodies, causes and projects.” In: *Desafios e Falácias: ensaios sobre a conjuntura atual* (São Paulo: Paulinas, 1991), 86.

24 Franz J. Hinkelammert, *Crítica de la Razón Utópica*, edición ampliada y revisada (Bilbao: Editorial Desclée de Brouwer, 2002).

25 Jung Mo Sung, “The Human Being as Subject: Defending the Victims,” in: Ivan Petrella, ed., *Liberation Theology: the Next Generation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 10-11; 17.

26 Ratzinger stated that “The fall of the European governmental systems based on Marxism turned out to be a kind of twilight of the gods of that theology.” In: “Relación Sobre la Situación Actual de la Fe y la Teología,” Cited in: Ivan Petrella, “Latin American Liberation Theology: Past, Present, and Future,” in: Ivan Petrella, ed., *Liberation Theology: the Next Generation*, xiv. The controversy with Cardinal Ratzinger resulted primarily from his statement “Instructions on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’” published in 1984 (available online at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html). To a direct response to this statement, see: Juan Luis Segundo, *Theology and the Church: A Response to Cardinal Ratzinger and a Warning to the Whole Church*, transl. by John W. Diercksmeier, revised edition (Cambridge: Harper & Row, 1987).

27 Petrella, “Latin American Liberation Theology,” in: Petrella, ed., *Liberation Theology*, xv.

tion theology is at work and one call for new historical projects is voiced clearly and loudly in the work of Ivan Petrella.

RECLAIMING HISTORICAL PROJECTS: IVAN PETRELLA

Intentionally polemic in his approach to some of the mythological figures of liberation theology²⁸ but sharp in his critique, Petrella has recently reclaimed a radical stance for liberation theology and, with it, an urgent call for the reestablishment of the discussion about historical projects as the central task of liberation theologians.²⁹ The pivotal point of Petrella’s critique lies precisely on the matter at stake in this essay and, for this reason, I should devote some time to a quick synthesis of his ideas.

Petrella sets the tone for his calling to liberation theology in the very first paragraphs of his book *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto*. It is time to “reinvent liberation theology” and the way to do that is to reinvent historical projects, to *liberate* the people rather than to meditate on liberation.³⁰ Petrella’s book starts with the presentation of liberation theology’s responses to the “missing historical project”³¹ and, from there, develops its argument that liberation theology *is* the construction of historical projects as history grants content to theological terms.³² In order for a theology to be liberatory it must be shaped in light of historical projects that incarnate theological principles such as the reign of God.³³

What is this new historical project like? To respond to this question, Petrella takes two preliminary steps. First, he relates liberation theology’s position about democracy and its internal inability, from the 1990s onwards, to “envision a more positive future” where new forms of democracy emerge.³⁴ Second, Petrella criticizes liberation theology’s conclusions about capitalism as being a “necessarily exploit-

28 “Polemic” is certainly the correct word to be used here as it is used in Petrella’s more recent work, *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic* (London: SCM Press, 2008), whereby the author criticizes, constructively but nonetheless polemically, figures like Gustavo Gutierrez, James Cone, and Maria Pilar Aquino.

29 Chilean theologian Mario Aguilar, for instance, is clearly impressed with Petrella’s work and identifies it as a new moment in the history of liberation theology: “Petrella’s critique shows a new direction and, as with any new venture, it will need years, and maybe another generation, for a post-writing evaluation.” Mario Aguilar, *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology*, vol. II: *Theology and Civil Society* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 168. For Aguilar’s more critical assessment of Petrella’s work, see: *Ibid.*, 174-175 and also vol. III of the same series, 11.

30 Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, vii.

31 According to Petrella, the three responses of liberation theology to the new world order after the collapse of the socialist bloc have all failed insofar they have been “incapable of moving from critique to the construction of alternatives that could give concepts like ‘liberation’ and ‘the preferential option for the poor’ renewed vigor.” See: *Ibid.*, 17.

32 *Ibid.*, 14.

33 Cf: *Ibid.*, 37-40.

34 There are, according to Petrella, three positions one could identify on liberation theology’s relation to democracy: (1) democracy via revolutionary socialism, (2) participatory democracy via the base communities, and (3) stagnant democracy. The first two projects failed, giving birth to a void of options in ways of relating to democracy, a fact that allowed for the third option, that of stagnant democracy, to take control over the discourse of liberation theology. See: *Ibid.*, chapter 3.

ative monolithic” system, a fact that “[suffocates] the imagination of new historical projects.”³⁵ In fact, Petrella concludes that liberation theologians have transformed capitalism into a god rather than identified it merely as an idol. “The best way to combat the idolatrous nature of capitalism,” Petrella prescribes, “is to get rid of its systemic, all powerful, all encompassing, quasi-divine quality.”³⁶

Having completed these preliminary steps, Petrella then moves to the more constructive part of his work. His proposals are based on the thought of social theorist Roberto Mangabeira Unger who assists Petrella with a new imagination for the construction of new and liberatory historical projects. Unger’s idea of “alternative pluralisms” can assist liberation theology in expanding its view of society, overcoming its narrow understandings of capitalism and, finally, by allowing an imagination for new institutions that will form new societies. Starting from concrete institutions, liberation theology would need to envisage change through a “step-by-step process rather than the empty imaginative leap between a monolithic capitalism to an equally monolithic socialism or abstractly defined participatory democracy.”³⁷ With a brief example, Petrella hints at how such a new historical project might look: small firms in certain regions of India, Brazil, and Malaysia have employed alternative forms of ownership of the means of production. Here, “the end result is neither capitalism nor socialism, but a democratized market economy.”³⁸

Is this God’s reign? Possibly no: the exploration of historical projects, Petrella argues, allows us to

exploit the rifts and crevices of a world that too often denies the majority their full humanity, a world where full redemption is outside our merely human grasp. However, while the messianic light is not ours to shine, we can still pursue the *limited redemptions* that historical projects provide.³⁹

Petrella’s theological insight is valuable here: historical projects do not bring the messianic age into being, but the absence of these projects obscure even our imagination of what God’s age can be. Without the limited redemptions history grants us, full redemption is simply an idol of one’s imagination, rather than the incarnation of divine liberation.

Petrella’s work, in this sense, fits the rupture thrust of liberation theology as it offers a self-critical evaluation of the path this theology has taken since its inception in the 1960s. In light of the scope of this paper, I believe that there are

35 Ibid., 77. Petrella lays out three basic premises in liberation theology’s arguments against capitalism: (1) dependency theory, (2) world system theory, and (3) the undertheorization of capitalism.

36 Ibid., 85.

37 Ibid., 107.

38 Ibid., 109.

39 Ibid., 121, emphasis added.

two major tasks that Petrella’s work invites us to address. First, liberation theology needs to expand its epistemological frontiers and enter into a more systematic conversation with the social sciences in order to enhance its vision of society’s problems and the possibilities of change.⁴⁰ Second, there is need for a theological re-articulation of our notions of redemption. I now turn my attention to these open tasks.

DOING THEOLOGY BEYOND THE TWO WALLS

If the paradigmatic event that demanded liberation theology’s attention in the 1990s was the collapse of the Berlin Wall, recent history has added to its records the collapse of a second Wall: the explosion of the bubble economy that ruled the world after the collapse of socialism in the late 1980s.⁴¹ Standing on the shadows of the cracks of the Berlin Wall, the ideology that preached the end of alternatives to capitalism seems to be ruined: Wall Street is cracking too.

The Walls that for six decades have marked the split of the world into two opposing historical projects are now in total exposure and the need for alternatives is urgent. The Berlin Wall and Wall Street have collapsed: it is time to do theology beyond the two great Walls. How is liberation theology to look in a world where that primary dichotomy between these two opposing historical projects no longer stands? I propose that the task is now to subvert these categories and do theology for an-other world. Experimentally and incompletely, I will highlight here three paths that I believe are instrumental for liberation theology and the imagination of alternative futures.

First of all: if once liberation theologians spoke of theology in revolutionary times,⁴² it seems plausible now to speak of theology in *subversive* times. Sadly, the theories of revolution that accompanied Marxist theories in the 20th century maintained the top-down structure of the societies they sought to overcome.⁴³ As Unger proposes, the idea of revolution, when thought of as an ultimate and com-

40 It is important to recognize that this dialogue has marked liberation theology since its inception. Nevertheless, the dramatic changes in the global political and social contexts demand a more complex set of theoretical tools than the one first employed by liberation theologians. For Petrella, as I showed above, the most important contribution lies in critical legal studies, embodied in the work of Roberto Unger.

41 In respect to the crash of the market and the theological implications to it, Joerg Rieger’s work is pivotal. In *No Rising Tide*, Rieger rightly identifies the logic of the market as a “logic of downturn.” The entire system is set in such a way to put pressure on the lower classes for the benefit of the upper classes. In a situation of such disparities of power, the notion that a “rising tide will lift all boats” is entirely false. See: *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), see, especially, chapter 2, where the “logic of downturn” is discussed.

42 Cf: José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). For some of the developments in the use of revolutionary language in Latin American theology, see: José Comblin, *The Church and the National Security State* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), chapter 2, especially pp. 30-38.

43 At the root of this problematic assessment of revolution theories, Unger identifies three major mistakes in classical European social theory: the “close-list ideas,” the “indivisibility” principle, and, determinism. See: *Democracy Realized: The Progressive Alternative* (New York & London: Verso, 1998), 22.

plete substitution of a system by another, “has become a pretext for its opposite.”⁴⁴ When the alternative to the status quo is pictured as the only alternative conceivable, transformation becomes the prescription to reach that goal, erasing a plurality of local alternatives. Not only the alternative is idealized and totalized, but so is the way to achieve it. As we have seen earlier, liberation theologians in the rupture group have perceived this problem. Jung Mo Sung, for instance, very soon realized that the concept of “liberation” in Latin America is emptied of its meaning in the acceptance of the “bipolar” and “revolutionary” thrust of dependency theory.⁴⁵ The illusion of a complete revolution, of the liberation from “all slavery,” has led some to regard only the revolutionary alternative, without realizing the dogmatism and totalitarianism conveyed in this message.⁴⁶

If revolution, understood as the substitution of one system for another, should be resisted, what are the paths for liberation? As Petrella suggests,⁴⁷ Unger’s work offers good avenues of thought for such a project, particularly his notion of “alternative pluralisms.”⁴⁸ Interestingly, Unger grounds this concept in an ethical principle based on the radical singularity and otherness of people, something very familiar for theologians and ethicists.⁴⁹ To the extent that human beings are multiple and plural, societies and the necessary changes within it ought to follow this plurality. “Each direction for the tapping of these opportunities,” Unger remarks, “would produce a different civilization, developing the powers and possibilities of humanity in a distinct way.”⁵⁰ The challenge no longer seems to be the creation of a project for humanity, but to experiment with fluid alternatives at the local level. Human liberation ought to be as plural as humanity itself.

Is revolution a sufficient concept to address this plurality of alternatives? The dream of a unified revolutionary class, be it the proletariat or the poor, runs the

44 Ibid., 20.

45 Sung, *Teologia e Economia*, 266.

46 Ibid., 267-269.

47 Cf: Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, chapter 5.

48 See: Unger, *Democracy Realized*, 25-27. The overall contribution of Unger’s project to theology in general, and to liberation theology in particular, has already been recognized by H. Jefferson Powell in “The Gospel According to Roberto: a Theological Polemic,” *Duke Law Journal*, 1988, Paper 437. Others works are: Charles Davis, “Religion and the Making of Society,” in: Robin W. Lovin and Michael J. Perry, eds., *Critique and Construction: A Symposium on Roberto Unger’s Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Paul E. Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Robert J. Araujo has even studied the parallels between Unger and Gutierrez in “Political Theory and Liberation Theology: The Intersection of Unger and Gutiérrez,” *Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (1994 - 1995), pp. 63-81. These connections are indeed promising and cannot be overlooked, but nonetheless some questions remain. Cornel West, for example, points out that Unger is still embedded in a “Eurocentric and patriarchal framework” remaining silent about the concerns of ordinary and oppressed people, most remarkably, too silent in relation to questions of race and gender. Cf: Cornel West, “Between Dewey and Gramsci: Unger’s Emancipatory Experimentalism,” Lovin and Perry, eds., *Critique and Construction*, 265.

49 Unger says: “Our capacity for love and solidarity grows through the strengthening of our ability to recognize and to accept the otherness of other people. It is in love, the love least dependent on idealization or similarity, that we most radically accept one another as the original, context-transcending beings we really are.” Ibid., 9.

50 Ibid., 27.

risk of idealizing groups of people and turning their frail and limited historical existence into an idolatrous vision that can only reinforce the oppression already imposed on them. Contrary to revolution’s top-down orientation, I propose that subversion accomplishes more as it emerges already from the bottom, from beneath the surface, shaking the grounds and structures of the status quo. Subversion contains a theological vision of God that takes place in the interstices of power, on the borders of the hierarchies, at places where the technologies of control fail to reach its arms. These are subversive times: it is time for liberation to locate itself beneath the official version of history and theology, not looking for a final irruption of a historical subject that will take the strings of history and save it once and for all.

Secondly, and as a result of what has just been said, liberation theology will need to rethink its position within the academy and the ecclesial structures. It has been argued that liberation theology has gained space among the official “versions” of academic theology and that this has harmed liberation theology’s commitment to the margins of society.⁵¹ Petrella has termed this as liberation theology’s ultimate “domestication” under the siege of ecclesial and academic strangleholds.⁵² Is the alternative to this a complete rupture with both the academy and the church? Is liberation theology incompatible with these institutions or are there ways to also subvert these spaces? Regardless of one’s answers to these provocations, the truth is that alternative pluralisms also involve critically considering the limitations that both church and academy, as they are currently incorporated, pose to liberation theology. These two institutions that together have accompanied Christian theology for more than ten centuries are now facing structural problems. Liberation, in this context, might also mean the subversion of these spaces and the construction of new spaces for theology.

Liberation theology claims to be a different way of “doing” theology. Theology as a “second act” is one of the basic premises assumed by liberation theologians.⁵³ The consequences of such claim are clear: theology, as other “products,” is part of a system of production: “Faith-praxis never comes in pure form,” says Leonardo Boff. “It comes mediated in a theology that, by its turn, constitutes itself as a cultural *product*...”⁵⁴ With this in mind, it would be accurate to speak of *theological modes of production*, as those means by which theology is fabricated. Who controls the means of such production and who benefits from its surplus? Is the

51 Marcella Althaus-Reid is a remarkable example of this. Feeling frustrated and even betrayed by liberation theology, she makes the point that liberation theology has accepted its mainline position in the academy and, moreover, that liberation theology has been commodified by global capitalism. Cf: Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology: Readings on Poverty, Sexual Identity and God* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 112, 129, 140. Ivan Petrella makes a similar argument in reference to black theology of liberation in the United States. He says: “From siren-filled nights and submachine guns to tenure and academic respectability, there lies the path black liberation theology has taken.” Cf: Petrella, *Beyond Liberation Theology*, 120.

52 Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 149.

53 Cf: Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 11.

54 Boff, *Teologia do Cativo e da Libertação*, 35.

theology produced in and by the church and the academy immersed in an alienating process of production resulting in precisely the opposite of liberation theology?

Affirming that this is the case is possibly an exaggeration. Nevertheless, in a context whereby the means of the production of knowledge and religious meaning are so attached to the imperial powers that shape the face of our globalizing economy, to re-imagine alternative spaces for theological production is important. In the United States, some groups apparently have taken the lead in this process proposing ideas such as the “relocation to the abandoned places of Empire” as a major task of Christianity today.⁵⁵ In fact, many communities have been formed in this direction. These groups have also been creatively appropriating ideas from the Christian monastic tradition to form something that Dietrich Bonhoeffer first envisioned as a “new type of monasticism.”⁵⁶ Underlying these proposals, there is the historical recognition that the first Christian monastic communities emerged exactly in the period when the church firstly associated with the powers of the Roman Empire.⁵⁷ Monasticism, in this sense, is born as a movement of resistance to Empire: can it still accomplish this today?

I take these experiences to be valid for the project of liberation theology insofar as they are an effort to produce new spaces for alternative (and plural) realities and, secondly, as they are marked by this commitment to relocation to the spaces of great pressure within society. In some ways, these experiences resemble the reality of the Ecclesial Base Communities in Latin America.⁵⁸ Common to them is the imagination of a new space for theological production. These are open, democratic, popular, multidisciplinary, lay-driven, and multi-generational spaces of learning where the means of production of knowledge are combined with the

55 Cf: Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today's Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008). Other important texts within new monasticism are: Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009); Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006). The basic tenets of the movement were formulated in: *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New monasticism*, edited by the Rutba House. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005).

56 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Letter to Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer (January 14, 1935),” in Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, eds., *A Testament of Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, revised edition (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 424. These are Bonhoeffer’s words to his brother: “the restoration of the church will surely come only from a new type of monasticism.”

57 It is also important to recognize here how studies in the monastic tradition, especially in Medieval Europe, have grown in the twentieth century. In his groundbreaking work on medieval monastic theology, Jean Leclercq has detected a distinction (not separation) between monastic and scholastic theologies emerging from alternative forms of institutional and spatial organization. See: Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009 [1957]), 256ff.

58 On the experience with the ecclesial base communities much has been written. The most concise reflection on the matter has been published by Frei Betto in *O que é Comunidade Eclesial de Base* (São Paulo: Abril Cultural & Editora Brasiliense, 1985). For a typological approach to the CEBs, having Brazil as its paradigmatic incorporation, see: Marcelo Azevedo, *Base Ecclesial Communities in Brazil: The Challenge of a New Way of Being the Church*, Transl. by John Druty (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1987). Petrella devotes some pages to relating the CEBs with liberation theology’s relation to democracy. See: *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 56-60.

daily practice of a community in the areas of great pressure of a society. If we seek an alternative vision for the future as we must, new spatial subversions will need to emerge, again: from the underground, from the spaces inhabited by the silenced bodies, and in dialogue with a reality that cries for change.⁵⁹

Finally, we come back to our initial question: who bakes the pie in the sky? On the topic, a recent “quantitative” analysis of the relation between belief in salvation and economic activity concluded that belief in the after-life increases economic growth. The equation is summarized thus: “religion contributes to economic growth by providing people with religious beliefs.”⁶⁰ As social analysis, the conclusion is correct: belief in the “after-life” is deeply connected with “worldly” matters; yet, as a theological perception, the claim is pernicious: it relates wealth with salvation and, as a consequence, it professes the rich as the saved and the poor as the damned. The sort of market soteriology that emerged during the collapse of Wall Street constantly reinforced this idea: the way out of the crisis is to “save the banks.”⁶¹ Liberation theology stands in opposition to this “quantitative” aspect of salvation and proposes instead a “qualitative” approach to soteriology: salvation is communion with God and among people, an “intra-historical reality.”⁶² “There is only one history,” Gutierrez concludes: “a ‘Christo-finalized’ history.”⁶³ What history is this and how can it resist the exclusivist soteriology of the market?

In my view, the challenge calls for a re-articulation of a soteriology of liberation. Embedded in this challenge stands the twofold task that is proper to soteriology: the understanding of what is wrong in the world and the search of God’s response to that. In the first task, lies the theological judgment of societies as inhospitable places for life’s flourishing and, secondly, the socio-theological search for signs of life that emerge in the places where the signs of death seem to be prevalent. The paradigmatic vision coming from the Exodus narrative remains pivotal at this point: God sees the suffering of the people, and God comes to deliver

59 In fact, a challenge to the powerful places of both academy and the church is a basic premise in liberation theology. Boff, for example, argues that all of liberation theology depends on this: “[t]hat the theologian leaves his/her cathedra and go to live among the populace... His or her function is that of being an organic intellectual: helping the oppressed to become conscious, to unmask the castrating ideologies, to elaborate and maintain a global vision, etc.” Boff, *Teologia do Cativo e da Libertação*, 58-59.

60 Rachel M. McCleary, “Salvation, Damnation, and Economic Incentives,” in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 22, No. 1, January 2007, 50.

61 See, for example, “To Save the Banks We Must Stand Up for the Bankers,” *Financial Times*, Jan 26, 2009, in: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7f76fb22-ebb7-11dd-8838-0000779fd2ac.html>. Also, see: “Saving the banks,” *The Washington Post*, Feb 8, 2009, in: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2009/02/07/AR2009020701681.html>. A more recent study with some prescriptions to overcome the crisis has reached similar conclusions: Daniel Alpert, Robert Hockett, and Nouriel Roubini, “The Way Forward: Moving from the Post Bubble, Post-Bust Economy to Renewed Growth and Competitiveness,” *New America Foundation*, October 2011, in: http://www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/the_way_forward.

62 Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 151-152.

63 *Ibid.*, 153.

the people (Exodus 3:7-12). What needs to be reframed, on the other hand, is the image of deliverance: our visions of Canaan.⁶⁴

Two of the authors studied in this essay present ideas that I judge to be important for the articulation of this new soteriology. First, we saw how Petrella proposes the concept of “limited redemptions”⁶⁵ and, second, we saw Sung’s suggestion for a complete revision of liberation theology’s messianism, claiming that at the root of the Christian faith remains this “defeated liberator-messiah,” a victim of a dominant Roman imperial project.⁶⁶ These two ideas resist any sort of soteriological triumphalism, one that associates salvation with *one* victorious historical project. Contrary to that, the constructive proposal would be a plurality of salvific spaces where the frailty of life subverts the powers of death incorporated in the dominant projects of a total society. Salvation, when understood as the process of liberation whereby God acts in creating life and subverting the signs of death, remains frail and small, as seeds promising alternative fruits that we cannot fully grasp but must taste in expectation.⁶⁷ Subversion lies precisely in the frailty that allows the seed to fly in the air taken by the Wind.

Canaan, in this sense, is not the Promised Land, but the crossing—the *Pessah*. Participating in the construction of new alternatives for the world *is* the salvific task. In this sense, the good news for liberation theology is that we do not need the blueprint for paradise⁶⁸—we need engagement to take the path of change, not the ability to foresee beyond history into God’s eternity. The theological task of constructing historical projects that better embody God’s creative force for the world is thus paradoxical: it is a construction that leaves room for its transformation. It is setting a tent, more than erecting buildings or constructing Walls. God’s liberation is this sub-versive and constant crossing. Subverting, inhabiting alternative spaces, crossing: these are the paths I believe we can take in elaborating and living out new historical settings whereby we become closer to life of God.

FINAL REMARKS

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God?” We all know only too well the parable used to answer this question: “It is like a mustard seed,” says Jesus (Mark 4:31). The interpretation is also known: the reign is very small at the begin-

ning but, in the end, it grows to become a large tree. From this, it follows that the kingdom is tall and strong. But some would argue for a different interpretation: mustard seeds, beyond being small, are also weeds.⁶⁹ They spread rapidly and rebelliously, a true nightmare for field owners. Here, the focus is not on the stature of the tree, but on the unexpected growth of the seed. Big farmers know that the real threat to the crops lies not in the heavy and immovable trees, but in the small and wild seeds that can sprout anywhere, anytime.

This has been the argument I have tried to convey in this essay: the reign of God lies not on the height of history, but on the underside of history spreading fragily and rebelliously. Today, I believe seeds are spreading fast and rebelliously on fields previously secured by great walls. The winds of spring are blowing and the crops of the field owners are now contaminated with a new seed, small enough to fly with the wind but hospitable enough to welcome life under its shade once it becomes a shrub. With this essay also, I tried to argue that the future of liberation depends on the frailty of these seeds, which we ought to follow, allowing our theologies to be attentive to the winds of change so that they can subversively sprout on the fields of the powerful land owners. On the interstices of these fields the subversive seeds are sprouting and producing the goods and the hopes for the baking of a new pie, one that we shall enjoy now. God’s reign is blowing.

Oigo una voz que me llama, casi un suspiro
Rema, rema, rema
 Jorge Drexler

⁶⁴ Liberation theology has been criticized by Native-American scholars for its use of the Exodus metaphor and the neglect in realizing that, from the perspective of the Canaanites, the Exodus meant extermination and dislocation. See: Robert Allen Warrior, “A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” in: R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

⁶⁵ Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 121.

⁶⁶ Sung, “The Human Being as Subject,” in: Petrella, ed., *Liberation Theology: the Next Generation*, 10-11; 17.

⁶⁷ I owe this premise to Mayra Rivera’s notion of transcendence as that which we cannot “grasp” but that which we “touch.” See: Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: a Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

⁶⁸ Unger is constantly using this terminology: “The program is not a blueprint.” In: *Democracy Realized*, 29.

⁶⁹ I owe this interpretation to my New Testament professor Paulo Garcia, dean of the Theology School at the Methodist University of São Paulo, Brazil.