



## Fragments of Liberation

Jeff Miley (January - February 2022)

Democratic confederalism is a project basically bereft of tactics and strategy. This is a most unfortunate state of affairs. For the alternatives of ecology or catastrophe are more starkly posed today than they ever have been. While the social ecological paradigm that underpins the project of democratic confederalism, according to which the very idea of the domination of nature by humans is rooted in the very real domination of humans by humans, and that therefore the struggle for an ecological society must be part and parcel of a broader struggle against hierarchy in all its forms, would seem increasingly compelling. What Abdullah Öcalan has labelled the terminal crisis of capitalist modernity appears to be unfolding before our very eyes. And the social, and political, and economic turbulence that are characteristic of this crisis present not only collective existential dangers, but also opportunities.

We would be wise to ask ourselves: why did Murray Bookchin spend the very last years of his life immersed in the effort to draw lessons from the history of revolutions in the so-called "West"?

The critical analysis of revolutionary situations past is no mere pastime for antiquarian tastes or proclivities. To the contrary, the lessons we learn from the past can be of decisive significance in shaping the content and contours of the revolutionary imaginary in the present, and should inform any discussion of revolutionary tactics and strategy.

Take, for example, the scourge of Leninism. The tyrannical core of the democratic centralist creed has yet to be reckoned with sufficiently among important factions of the anticapitalist left.

Or, for that matter, the bankruptcy of social democracy, its history of warmongering, of complicity with militarism and nationalism, and of course its convergence with capitalism and its role as the bulwark of the nation-state, continues to go unacknowledged by even more important factions on the so-called left.

Then there is the experience of the Spanish revolution. The failure of the anarcho-syndicalists to take advantage of the revolutionary opportunity that presented itself with the collapse of the Second Republic in July of 1936, remains largely ignored, mostly unaccounted for in libertarian circles on the left.

We might add the outcomes of the anticolonial revolts, the generalized failure of the strategy of national liberation to lead to substantive political or economic independence, much less human emancipation.

The project of democratic confederalism is born out of critical reflection in relation to all of these fateful events, all of these historical defeats. But without succumbing to the temptation of defeatism or nihilism, and while refusing to let the revolutionary flame be extinguished. It advances a distinctively revolutionary, but at the same time libertarian, agenda.

But how is it to come into being? How do we get from here to there? This is a question that has heretofore remained very much under-addressed.

One thing seems certain: the birth of democratic confederal social relations, by whatever means, would definitely require a revolution in consciousness, one that would encompass a transformation of passive constituents and consumers into an active citizenry.

But there are clear barriers to the revolution in consciousness from within the confines of capitalist modernity. The habits and mindset of acquiescence to and even support for hierarchical social relations are not only deeply entrenched but also constantly reinforced. The social-psychological pressures to conform to and reproduce the status quo are indeed intense. So much so that a kind of double consciousness would seem the most one could hope to achieve – fits and bursts of revolutionary consciousness interspersed with more mundane bouts of cynicism and nihilism, if not even outright endorsement of at least some of the core ideological tenets, some of the dominant myths that buttress the unjust, genocidal, and ecocidal order we are forced to inhabit.

By all means, revolutionary consciousness is not liable to be distributed equally among the population, and so vanguardism of one type or another, regardless of organizational form, would appear unavoidable, probably even advisable. But once we embrace vanguardism, insidious hierarchies would have seemed to seep in. The notion of fully egalitarian, bottom-up, grass roots, direct democracy would thus appear perhaps unattainable, at best a regulative ideal.

If the democratic confederal order is to be ushered in by a vanguard, necessarily so, then how can we pretend to be struggling for the dissolution, the abolition, of hierarchical social relations? This is an aporia to which I shall return. But first, there is more to be said about the revolution in consciousness.

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Humanity dangles at the brink of the abyss. A radical transformation of the constellation of social and material power relations would seem urgently required if we are to step back from the precipice. Such a transformation in turn presupposes a critical mass or core constituency of subjects in possession of a will to revolutionary struggle. A will to struggle against oppression and exploitation in all their forms, for freedom, for equality, for justice, for democracy.

The dialectic of hierarchy and resistance races forward to an ever-more uncertain denouement. A revolution in consciousness is what we desperately need, to turn the tide. There are 5,000 years of residue, of detritus, which we must shake off. The naturalization of hierarchy, the orientation of acquiescence, the desire to dominate and be dominated. (The

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will to struggle versus the will to power). These have all been forged through complex historical processes, and so are deeply ingrained in the collective unconscious. They short-circuit the will to struggle.

But so too are there reservoirs of resistance, upon which we can rely for resilience and inspiration. Role models from a revolutionary pantheon, whose examples can flash by in a moment of crisis, capable of rupturing the confines of homogenous empty time, of bringing forth the now. (Cleansed by the blood of the martyrs, of those who fell on the path of righteousness). Let us learn from their struggles.

Without a revolution in consciousness, there can be no transcendence of the constricted confines of capitalist modernity. There can only be a coup d'état. A state can be captured by a counter-elite; property relations can even be modified; but the people cannot come to power, unless the people's consciousness has been fundamentally modified.

Awakened, some might say. Demystified, others. But I would beg to differ. The language of awakening, of demystification, misses the mark. For revolutionary consciousness can be characterized by an ability to dream, or to achieve a mystical mindset. Dreamers and mystics need not be social conformists, after all. Though dominant myths definitely need to be shattered, by which I mean subjected to radical critique.

Freire referred to 'conscientization', which he considered "the necessary means by which men (sic), through a true praxis, leave behind the status of objects to assume the status of historical subjects" (p.128).

Freire also insisted: "[m]en (sic) will be truly critical if they live the plenitude of praxis, that is, if their actions encompass a critical reflection which increasingly organizes their thinking and thus leads them to move from a purely naïve knowledge of reality to a higher level, one which enables them to perceive the causes of reality" (p.101).

What exactly does a revolution in consciousness entail? And moreover, how can it be brought about? One answer is to insist that consciousness can be forged in struggle. But this in turn begs the question of where the will to struggle comes from.

Murray Bookchin liked to invoke the Greek concept of 'paideia', which he deemed indispensable for democratic confederalism, and which consists in the moral education and character building necessary for transforming passive constituents and consumers into active citizens in a participatory democracy. According to Bookchin, such education entails a "conscious reconstruction of our relationship to each other and to the world" (p.299). He had in mind Western societies in which representative democracies breed passive constituents and consumers rather than active citizens. The revolution in consciousness, for him, was inseparable from political education, and worked to realize this transformation, from passive to active, from constituents and consumers to citizens.

This is not too different from Paolo Freire's famous formulation, in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, of the concept of "conscientization." For Freire, the relevant transformation is from object to subject, to historical subject, to be precise. Again the notion of agency seems to be key. From an object being acted upon to a self-determining agent, such are the terms of the transformation.

Education is also at the heart of Freire's conceptualization. After all, his is a work of critical pedagogy. But Freire proposes a radical departure from traditional, hierarchically conceived pedagogical practice. In so doing, he takes us further down the road of recognizing what a revolution in consciousness looks like.

Feminist practices of "consciousness raising" represent another tradition for conceptualizing what a revolution in consciousness might look like. Key to the process is a group dynamic, by which women come to recognize their situation and plight by listening and speaking with others who relay similar experiences.

(Class in itself / class for itself). For too long, materialist theorists reproduced crude utilitarian psychological assumptions, predicated on the notion of interest. From individual interest to class interest, from class interest to class conflict, so the theory goes/went. But both moves, the assumption of the primacy of class in relation to other group affiliations, and the smooth transition from class interest to class conflict, turn out, upon reflection, to be more than a little problematic.

For Rosa Luxemburg, consciousness is forged in struggle. There is something transformative about the struggle itself. The question remains, how does the will to struggle first emerge. But once it has been ignited, Luxemburg surmised, in the process of struggle, new horizons of consciousness can be acquired.

The notion of self-liquidating leadership is highly relevant in relation to the idea of a revolution in consciousness. This because the emphasis on political education is a central component of such a process. Which brings our attention to the educators themselves. How are they appointed? Who educates the educators? How should they conduct themselves? Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, makes a useful distinction between haranguing a constituency with a political speech and genuine education – the latter consisting in convincing the people that their destiny lies in their own hands. Though Fanon's formulation is unfortunately biased against spiritual beliefs, it nevertheless is perceptive insofar as it points to an ideal of empowerment, indeed, self-determination.

The distinction between leaders and led itself should be somehow overcome. This is what can be referred to as the quality of self-liquidating leadership – when leaders encourage their followers to think for themselves, to act for themselves, to overcome the dialectic of leading and following. Though there remains a question of whether in some sense leadership is an unavoidable element in political action.

If the motto for a communal ethic is, 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs', this leaves room for differences in ability. Revolutionary pedagogy, however, should be concerned to cultivate abilities, at the same time that it should be sensitive to disabilities.

The revolution in consciousness requires a reflexive understanding of the ways in which our subjectivity is inevitably interpellated by the systems of hierarchy in which we are immersed. These systems ingrain themselves in our psyches most insidiously, even structuring the contours and content of our semi-conscious and our unconscious desires.

And so we come to the point where we must confront that to clarify what a revolution in consciousness would entail and requires in turn requires a theory of consciousness, and perchance, a theory of the unconscious. Jameson has written eloquently about the theory of the political unconscious.

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These are complex questions. One of my mentors, Victor Wolfenstein a psycho-analytic Marxist, dedicated most of his intellectual career to laying the groundwork for such a discussion.

Therborn on interpellated subjectivity is useful in this regard. He sketches the different dimensions of interpellation, which helps in terms of addressing the kinds of questions that must be posed to begin to shake loose, to reflexively reorient, to fight the fascist within, as Foucault once put the point.

Reification, projection, and venting are all processes that work to constrict and confine the contours of our consciousness. With reification, what we have is the naturalization, the "thingification," as they say in Spanish, the incrustation in our mind's eye of patterns of social and material relations that are historically constructed and in principle malleable. With projection, what we face is the tendency to interpret and detect in others the motives and intent that in fact orient ourselves. With venting we get the propensity to lash out at those weaker than oneself. These are all pathologies that are quite prevalent, and that work to undermine the forging of collective resistance and solidarity.

A revolution in consciousness would entail an overcoming of these rather ubiquitous social-psychological pathologies. It has in this vein a certain affinity with the therapeutic. Though the therapeutic culture itself is symptomatic of the ways in which a pathological system manages to secure quiescence. To be functional in a pathological system, we submit, is reflective of a deep pathology.

A revolution in consciousness would entail the forging of antihierarchical, democratic sensibilities. It would therefore require an eradication of the desire to dominate and be dominated. Or, if not eradication, at least sublimation. To treat the revolution in consciousness thus requires an engagement with the theory of desire.

Revolution as process, with consciousness forged in struggle, sounds cogent. But from whence emerges the will to struggle? Here we can learn from historical examples. The Haitian revolution, for example, for which, according to C.L.R. James, "voodoo was the medium of conspiracy." On a more individual level, the great Frederick Douglass recounts in his autobiographical self-portrait the role that a certain root played in strengthening his resolve.

Rather than demystification, it might make more sense to conceive of the revolution in consciousness as a commitment to systematically smash false idols. A campaign against idolatry, per chance. Though such a framing might be biased against the idols, the worship of which should be understood before it is dismissed.

The ecumenical imperative renders it difficult to chart too much in the way of the metaphysics of revolutionary consciousness. We start from the imperative to combat the paradigm of capitalist modernity, to counter it with a resistance narrative associated with democratic modernity. But there are many resistance narratives, which converge on the political plane. A commitment to democratic modernity, political not metaphysical, we might say, to borrow a phrase from Rawls.

For the world to be radically transformed, we must become somehow other than who we heretofore have been. We must transcend the narrow horizons we have inherited. This need not mean casting aside the traditions into which we have been born. For traditions are, by their nature, multivalent, which means that there are different currents within them. The revolutionary task,

the challenge for revolutionary consciousness, is to revindicate the currents of resistance within one's given tradition. Though, of course, a disenchanted individual should always be free to disavow their cultural inheritance instead.

From quiescence to resistance. From complacency to militance. From complicity to commitment. Such is the transformation, the expansion of horizons experienced in a revolution of consciousness. But revolutionary consciousness is a dangerous thing, since, after all, the status quo of intersecting hierarchies is firmly entrenched. Those who rise up most frequently get beat back down. A spiral of violence can easily be triggered. So an ethic of conviction needs to be balanced by an ethic of responsibility, to invoke Max Weber's cautionary frame.

But now, the stakes of quiescence are simply too high. Capitalist modernity, in crisis, too lethal. When a ship careens towards a waterfall, those who argue for it to stay the course are the reckless ones. As Mike Davis has put it, reality itself is becoming increasingly unrealistic.

The revolution in consciousness is required for the emergence of truly self-determining subjects. To burst asunder the boundaries imposed by this unjust and unstable order. To bring about a new dawn, a new day. To banish into the twilight the cult of hierarchy, for once and for all.

But how can this revolution be achieved? It requires a constant commitment to the pursuit of truth on the part of a people in struggle. It requires a realization that only the people themselves can be the subjects of emancipation. That only the people themselves can realize their own freedom. That no one can give it like a gift to them. That it is something that they must seize for themselves.

A learning process, and a process by which false starts and missteps are likely to abound. An arduous process, full of setbacks and defeats. But a process nonetheless, in which the lessons gleaned from the struggle can come to glimmer, can come to shine.

The struggle must prefigure the values and ethos for which we are fighting. There should be as little as possible any contradiction between means and ends. By organizing ourselves democratically, by decentralizing, indeed shattering, the chain of command, by encouraging initiative emergent from the bottom up, from the grass roots, by pursuing the motto that the last shall be first, that the stone that the builder refused shall be the head cornerstone. Such prefigurative praxis can trigger a revolution in consciousness.

The word revolution means a return to the origin. Like with the turning of a wheel. And indeed, a revolution in consciousness would in a very real sense entail a recovery of egalitarian sensibilities long covered over by the long history of hierarchy.

This is why the revolution in consciousness should incorporate a progressive curriculum, one intended to cultivate such egalitarian sensibilities. The curriculum could only be co-constructed, it cannot be unilaterally imposed. It has to respond to the interests and concerns of all the people involved.

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According to the scenario foreseen by Bookchin, the revolution in consciousness would lead to a burgeoning of grass roots, local assemblies, that could confederate and come increasingly to challenge the authority of the state. In effect, a dual power

situation would come into being. The proliferation of popular assemblies would further advance the revolution in consciousness, dialectically reinforcing a spiraling of ever more strident demands. Confrontation with the state would ensue; and out of this conflict, the movement would either be whipped into submission, or coopted and corrupted, or further radicalized, infused with resolute determination to face down the state, come what may.

However, what may come could well be a wave of brutal repression. In fact, Bookchin's scenario would seem to presume a relatively tolerant and liberal state, one that would allow for the blossoming of counterhegemonic institutions effectively incarnating an incipient dual power to gestate in its womb, to develop and consolidate themselves under its watch. Yet, there is ample reason to suspect that in a situation where existing constellations of material and social power relations come under real threat, that the state would forsake its liberal façade and take on a more authoritarian bent. Moreover, in many parts of the world, and certainly in those places most propitious for the emergence of a revolutionary situation, the state is very rarely characterized by much in the way of respect for civil liberties to begin with. As if that weren't enough, we must be realistic about the extremely perverse consequences for the prospects of revolutionary mobilization provided by the proliferation of surveillance and the normalization of a state of exception so thoroughly entrenched in our age of the war on terror, and further exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic. And finally, we must reckon with the paramilitary forces on the neo-fascist right, increasingly emboldened across the globe, that are certainly complicit with the coercive apparatus of the state, and that are preparing for direct confrontation as well.

The obstacles to establishing a democratic confederal order would thus appear quite formidable, to say the least. But even if such an order could be inaugurated, the transcendence of capitalism and of the nation-state would still be a long way off. That is, in large part, because these systems operate at the global level. We live in a capitalist world system, and one in which the nation-state constitutes a fundamental component of the global governing infrastructure. Escape from that global system is incredibly difficult to achieve. Any single attempt to escape can be relatively easily isolated, effectively neutralized, if need be crushed. Hence, the quintessential truth of the dictum that for the revolution to survive, it is imperative that it spread, indeed, that it ultimately engulf the core of the capitalist system itself.

Let us leave aside for the moment the immense challenge of even imagining such a revolutionary tide sweeping across the globe. Let us bring into focus first the basic contours of the distinctive strategy of democratic confederalism for transcending the system of the capitalist nation-state. In a nutshell, in relation to capitalism, the local assemblies would have to take up the task of municipalizing the economy. This is fundamentally different from the nationalization of the means of production. It is also different from, but complementary with, the establishment of workers' control at the point of production. Such a strategy certainly implies the need for a broad confederation of local assemblies, to avoid being outflanked by the concentrated power of multinational corporations.

Which in turn poses the question of how to transcend the nation-state. One of the core features of the state is its monopoly of legitimate violence. At the core of the capitalist system, and even across much of the periphery, the technical sophistication of the coercive apparatus makes breaking such a monopoly a most daunting task, absent insurrection among the military rank

and file. This is why campaigns to get enlisted soldiers to refuse, resist, and rebel should be considered a high priority, to say the least. Moreover, even assuming that an effective break in the monopoly of violence could be achieved, the fact remains that the globe is governed by an international system of nation-states. Consequently, any territory that attempts to break away from this mold will face great pressure to be reincorporated into an existing sovereign nation-state, or else restructure itself along statist lines, to constitute itself as a state of its own.

To complicate the matter further, such external pressures to conform to the contours and content of the nation-state system are bound to be reinforced by the internal imperative to form a confederation of local assemblies. This imperative is born out of the effort to avoid being outflanked by the concentration of economic and military powers. Confederation would entail a significant degree of coordination among the different local assemblies.

The distinction between policy-making and administration upon which Bookchin relies to distinguish the power dynamics of a confederation from those of a nation-state would appear ultimately difficult to sustain. The abolition of the state might therefore be best conceived as a radical democratization of the state apparatus, which is what Marx seemed to have in mind when he spoke of the need "to smash the bureaucratic-military machine."

The followers of Antonio Gramsci stress the importance of balancing the pessimism of the intellect with the optimism of the will. Activists in the Kurdish Freedom Movement like to say that resistance is life. We must cultivate the will to resist, even in the midst of the most harrowing of circumstances, when we know that the odds are stacked against us, when defeat seems nearly certain. We may have been disabused of the confidence that the future belongs to us. But this need not mean that we give up on the struggle to forge a livable and truly democratic alternative to the unfolding disaster of the terminal crisis of capitalist modernity. The stakes are simply too high for that. Ecology or catastrophe it is, as Murray Bookchin presciently framed the scenario we must face. The task for our generation, upon which the fate of all the generations depends, is to promote the revolution in consciousness, and with it the will to resist. While at the same time we need to think systematically about democratic-confederal, revolutionary tactics and strategy.

It is in such a spirit that we would call for an ecumenical convergence among liberationist currents within a multiplicity of metaphysical and/or religious traditions. In an effort to overcome the militant secularism that has for too long characterized the anti-capitalist left, a feature that has limited its appeal among the toiling masses, serving to alienate it from the spiritual resources for resilience to which broad swathes of these masses so frequently recur.

Along these lines, a revindication of the legacy of liberation theology, a consideration of its considerable merits, would seem in order. What follows is a brief attempt at a critical engagement with two foundational texts in liberation theology, from the perspective of a political sociologist – who has become increasingly aware of the theological dimension of the contemporary civilizational crisis of capitalist modernity; who is unsatisfied with the secularist dogmatism that remains so ubiquitous in social scientific circles, perhaps especially on the left; and who tries to always keep Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach in mind.



These foundational texts certainly suffer from some important limitations – with respect to the question of patriarchy, for example, they have way too little to say; also, indigenous and ecological hermeneutics remain largely outside of their frames of reference (though by the 1990s, Boff himself would come to elaborate an ecological theology). But they nevertheless helped open a path for feminists, queer theorists, critical race scholars, indigenous activists, environmentalists and others to elaborate their own versions of liberation theology.

One of the more interesting aspects of liberation theology has to do with its radical democratic impulse. Such an impulse is clearly evident in the classic and controversial text by Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power. Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, first published in Portuguese in Brazil in 1981.

Boff is eloquent in his denunciation of the “use that is often made by many social systems of the Christian God and the Christian tradition.” He insists that, though “[t]hese systems call themselves theistic; in reality, they worship the idols of money, power, and material goods” (p.24). The living God, by contrast, Boff maintains, can only be “encountered on the path of justice” (p.24). As such, he advocates an unapologetically activist vision of the Church, arguing in no uncertain terms that “the Church must march alongside and with the people as they move toward their own complete humanization” (p.31).

Boff would quickly be rebuffed by the Church hierarchy for daring to insist that, “[f]rom a sociological perspective, the Church operates out of an authoritarian system” (p.40). Boff would criticize in no uncertain terms the decision-making process in the Church. He would complain: “Leaders are chosen within the strict confines of those who hold ecclesial power; they are imposed on local communities, thrusting to the margins the vast majority of the laity who often possess greater professional, intellectual, and even theological qualifications” (p.34). This problem he would identify as one of excessive centralization of decision-making, and he would go on to diagnose: “The centralization of decision-making inevitably leads to marginalization; this has an effect on basic rights to information and participation in those decisions that affect the responsibility of both the individual and the community” (p.34).

Alongside his denunciation of authoritarian machinations of the Church, Boff would revindicate the alternative example of the so-called *comunidades eclesiales de base*. The revindication of these base communities constituted a call for a transformative, horizontalizing of power relations in the Church. As such, the theological message of Christ’s preferential option for the poor went hand in hand with demands for a restructuring of power relations in the Church. It is not surprising that this bold call for institutional change would be met with intolerance on the part of the Church hierarchy.

According to Boff, the base ecclesial community is “the place where a true democracy of the people is practiced, where everything is discussed and decided together, where critical thought is encouraged.” He, furthermore, continues: “For a people who have been oppressed for centuries, whose ‘say’ has always been denied, the simple fact of having a say is the first stage in taking control and shaping their own destiny” (p.9). The emergence of these base communities Boff would hail as the sight where “the preferential option for the poor” announced by the bishops at their meeting in Puebla in 1979 was taking concrete form, and “the privileged status of the poor as the new emerging historical subject which will carry on the Christian project in the world” (p.9) could thus be realized and

recognized. To the theological claim about the preferential option for the poor, Boff thus adds a sociological claim about the poor as an emergent historical subject, who will, indeed, “decide the shape of future society” (p.11). Both of these claims he would join and ground empirically in the experiences of the base communities.

For Boff, the base communities manifest an alternative organizing principle, that of charism, according to which the Spirit makes its presence felt in the community through the exercise of each of the members’ unique abilities. Boff here comes close to announcing the classic, radical democratic ethic: to each according to their needs, from each according to their abilities. He stresses the “basic equality” in the Church, given that “all are immersed in the risen Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit” (p.155). To this end, he explicitly points beyond Vatican II in calling for the principle of collegiality to be applied not only among the bishops and priests, but among the laity as well. He claims that the underlying equality among all members of the Church leads to “the idea of democracy,” though he adds the caveat that there is one difference, namely, “that ecclesial power is understood as derived from and sharing in the power of the Spirit and the risen Christ, active in the community, and not simply derived from the people alone (as is commonly understood in other forms of democracy)” (p.155).

In Boff’s brief sketch of the base communities, he remarks that “[t]he Gospel is shared in absolute freedom,” that “[e]veryone is given a chance to speak and to give their opinion about a given fact or situation,” and that, “[s]urprisingly, the popular exegesis of the community comes very close to the ancient exegesis of the fathers of the Church” (p.127).

This corresponds to Boff’s understanding of the history of the Church as one in which it was effectively corrupted by power. Indeed, according to Boff, “[t]here is a great difference between the Church of the first three centuries and the later Church which rose to power” (p.54).

Boff includes a very interesting, though ultimately problematic, discussion of syncretism in the text – indeed, a chapter titled “In Favor of Syncretism,” no less. Boff’s discussion has been referred to by Ulrich Berner as “one of the few instances of a positive theological understanding of syncretism” among Christian theologians (“The Notion of Syncretism in Historical and/or Empirical Research,” 2001, p.499). Boff’s point of departure is that “[p]ure Christianity does not exist, never has existed, never can exist” (p.92). In a word, for Boff, Christianity is always syncretized. And yet, Boff nevertheless still defends an “essential core of Christian faith.” His model of syncretism is one in which “another culture ... is converted in such a way that it ceases to be what it was, at its roots, and becomes an expression of the Christian faith” (p.101). Otherwise, he argues, “Christian identity is corrupted and absorbed by the identity of each culture” (p.101). But if the encounter between Christianity and another culture can only be conceived as ending in either conversion or corruption, what space for syncretism is really left? Moreover, how does such a framing of the alternatives square with Boff’s ontological point of departure that Christianity is always, by definition, syncretized? To his credit, though, he does admit that “[t]here is the growing conviction that the present Christian and Catholic syncretism is incapable of doing justice to other cultures,” and he even goes so far as to claim that “the future of Christianity depends on its ability to formulate new syncretisms” (p.106). This just before espousing what he calls a “pedagogy of flexibility” (pp.106-107).

Alongside Boff's foundational text, preceding it by a decade, is the work of Gustavo Gutierrez. In his monumental and foundational classic, *A Theology of Liberation*, first published half a century ago, in 1971 in Peru, Gutierrez set out to reflect upon "the theological meaning of the process of the liberation of man throughout history" (p.x). Written in direct response to the surge in revolutionary aspirations across Latin America over the course of the sixties, Gutierrez hails what he sees as "the struggle to construct a just and fraternal society, where people can live with dignity and be the agents of their own destiny;" and he connects this struggle with the Bible's promise of "liberation – salvation – in Christ as the total gift" (p.x). Gutierrez poses the question: "what relation is there between salvation and the historical process of the liberation of man?" (p.45). His answer strikes an unabashedly activist chord. For, according to Gutierrez, "[p]articipation in the process of liberation is an obligatory and privileged locus for Christian life and reflection." Indeed, he insists that "[i]n this participation will be heard nuances of the Word of God which are imperceptible in other existential situations and without which there can be no authentic and fruitful faithfulness to the Lord" (p.49).

For Gutierrez, "beyond – or rather, through – the struggle against misery, injustice, and exploitation the goal is the *creation of a new man*" (p.146). To this end, he admits that his theological agenda aspires to nothing less than a "cultural revolution," though he is quick to emphasize that "in order for this liberation to be authentic and complete, it has to be undertaken by the oppressed people themselves and so must stem from the values proper to these people" (p.91). He here nods explicitly to the work of Paolo Freire, whose "pedagogy of the oppressed" sketches the outlines of the process of "conscientization," or the birth of "critical awareness," by which "the oppressed person rejects the oppressive consciousness which dwells in him, becomes aware of his situation, and finds his own language" (p.91). However, such critical awareness, Gutierrez stresses, "is not a state reached once and for all, but rather a permanent effort of man who seeks to situate himself in time and space, to exercise his creative potential, and to assume his responsibilities" (p.92).

Gutierrez articulates a decidedly this-worldly vision of salvation, grounded in the Old Testament narrative of Exodus, in the premises and promises of the prophets, and the Gospels, though tellingly absent is nearly any mention of the Book of Revelation. Gutierrez argues, emphatically, that "in fact, there are not two histories, one profane and one sacred, 'juxtaposed' or 'closely linked';" but that "[r]ather there is only one human destiny, irreversibly assumed by Christ," whose "redemptive work embraces all the dimensions of existence and brings them to their fullness" (p.153). Indeed, Gutierrez insists, that "the salvific action of God underlies all human existence;" that "[t]he historical destiny of humanity must be placed definitively in the salvific horizon;" and that, as such, "there is only one history – a 'Christo-finalized' history" (p.153). He defends this line of argument through a double-analysis, of the relationship between creation and salvation, and of the eschatological promises.

His reading of the Exodus is particularly poignant. For Gutierrez, the Exodus "is the long march towards the promised land in which Israel can establish a society free from misery and alienation" (p.157). In his words, "[t]he God who makes the cosmos from chaos is the same God who leads Israel from alienation to liberation" (p.158). The message of the Exodus constitutes, from Gutierrez's perspective, close to the very core theme of the Holy Book – its memory "pervades the pages of the

Bible and inspires one to reread often the Old as well as the New Testaments" (p.158). The story is "paradigmatic," remaining "vital and contemporary due to similar historical experiences which the People of God undergo" (p.159). The fundamental lesson he draws is that "to struggle against misery and exploitation and to build a just society is already to be part of the saving action, which is moving towards its complete fulfillment" (p.159).

In relation to the eschatological promises, Gutierrez rails against "a kind of Western dualistic thought (matter-spirit) foreign to the Biblical mentality," and, he adds, "becoming more foreign also to the contemporary mentality." According to Gutierrez, to pose the question of whether the eschatological promises point to the prospect of spiritual or temporal redemption is to perpetuate a false dilemma. Rather, the eschatological promises are more appropriately interpreted as being partially fulfilled "through liberating historical events, which are in turn new promises marking the road towards total fulfillment" (p.167). Gutierrez does not shy away from his central, this-worldly claim; indeed, he maintains, "[t]he complete encounter with the Lord will mark an end to history, but it will take place in history" (p.168).

Gutierrez elaborates a structural interpretation of sin, which he defines as "a social, historical fact, the absence of brotherhood and love in relations among men, the breach of friendship with God and with other men, and, therefore, an interior, personal fracture" (p.175). He stresses the "collective dimension" of sin, indeed, insisting that "[s]in is evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of man by man, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes" (p.175). Sin appears, according to Gutierrez, as "the fundamental alienation, the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation" (p.175). It demands, in effect, a "radical liberation, which in turn implies a political liberation" (p.176).

Gutierrez makes an explicit effort to root his theology of liberation in the concrete context of Latin America. He portrays his theological agenda as a reflection on and response to the revolutionary struggles that had emerged across the region over the decade of the 1960s. His is a theology that is organically linked to such struggles. It is immersed in an ethos of commitment and participation in them. In such a vein, Gutierrez declares: "To place oneself in the perspective of the Kingdom means to participate in the struggle for the liberation of those oppressed by others" (p.203). At the same time, he takes very seriously the social scientific discourse on dependency, and even frames his own agenda as part of a broader struggle for self-determination for the region, whose theology and whose ecclesiastical realm more generally he describes as having remained largely dependent as well. Indeed, he depicts his project as part of a movement in which the Latin American church is gradually coming to "assert its own personality" (p.140).

In a chapter titled "Encountering God in History," Gutierrez would sketch the contours of what he calls a "theology of the neighbor," based on the basic idea that "we meet God in our encounter with men" – especially "the poor, margined, exploited ones" (p.194, 201). Here he argues that "[t]he God of Biblical revelation is known through interhuman justice;" that "[w]hen justice does not exist, God is not known; he is absent;" and that, indeed, "God wants justice, not sacrifices" (pp.195-196). In a word, for Gutierrez, "to know God is to do justice" (p.194). Furthermore, he underscores the difference between justice and individual charity, insisting that it is "necessary to avoid the pitfalls" of the latter (p.202). And he goes so far as to emphasise that genuine, "political charity"

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implies a "transformation ... directed towards a radical change in the foundation of society, that is, the private ownership of the means of production" (p.202).

To pursue a spirituality of liberation, Gutierrez insists, is no easy task, especially for those who are well-off. This because "[o]ur conversion process is affected by the socioeconomic, political, cultural, and human environment in which it occurs;" and so, "authentic conversion" requires "a change in these structures" (p.205). As he puts it: "We have to break with our mental categories, with the way we relate to others, with our way of identifying with the Lord, with our cultural milieu, with our social class, in other words, with all that can stand in the way of a real, profound solidarity with those who suffer, in the first place, from misery and injustice" (p.205).

Meanwhile, among those already committed to the struggle, but for whom "oppression and the liberation of man seem to make God irrelevant," he insists, "there must blossom faith and hope in him who comes to root out injustice and to offer, in an unforeseen way, total liberation" (p.204).

Yet Gutierrez remains supremely confident in the future, as well as in the efficacy of the agency of those engaged in the struggle for liberation. He writes: "The future of history belongs to the poor and exploited. True liberation will be the work of the oppressed themselves; in them, the Lord saves history" (p.208). A half-century on, it can certainly seem hard to relate to such confidence in the future. The brutal repression of the revolutionary movements to which Gutierrez refers, the era of bloody dictatorships that had already begun to sweep across the region, would leave too much trauma in its wake. Not to mention our coming to grips with an ecological crisis capable of reigniting a millenarian, apocalyptic chord conspicuously absent from Gutierrez's optimistic, future-oriented account. Tellingly, Gutierrez only refers to Revelation once in the entire text, to note that "To recall Christ is to believe him, and this celebration is a feast" (Apoc. 19:7) (p.207).

A bit of Benjaminian syncretism of historical-materialism with mysticism would seem a necessary corrective and complement to Gutierrez's overly-optimistic narrative, somewhat naively situated as it is almost entirely within homogenous empty time. Gutierrez's rather dismissive treatment of the theme of "messianism" is most indicative in this regard. He relies on Blanquart to make the argument that "politico-religious messianism is a backward-looking reaction to a new situation which the messianists are not capable of confronting with the appropriate attitude and means" (p.236). This rhetoric of backward-looking versus forward-looking would seem to suggest that Gutierrez remains unaware of the fact that the word revolution actually means a return to the origins. Here's where an opening up to indigenous cosmology and spirituality – another syncretic sensibility – could also help. The fact that Gutierrez himself comes from a half-indigenous background might have provided the existential basis for such a turn, but alas, he was not yet alive to that impulse back in 1971.

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For those who situate themselves within the Abrahamic tradition, the revolution in consciousness may well be characterized by an embrace of the core tenets of liberation theology. The liberationist interpretation of the promise of the God of Abraham is eminently compatible with the paradigm of social ecology and the political project of democratic confederalism. It is not, of course, the only metaphysical tradition so compatible.

Secular humanist, Buddhist, and many other comprehensive worldviews can also converge upon a firm commitment to the struggle against unjust and illegitimate hierarchy in all its forms. The point is manifestly not to ground our paradigm and project upon any one set of metaphysical assumptions; it is rather to illustrate how our paradigm and project can avoid falling prey to a dynamic of divide and conquer over questions of religion. In this respect, our impulse to revindicate the legacy of liberation theology has a strong affinity with Abdullah Öcalan's call for a Democratic Islam Congress.

What can be done to help bring about the convergence among liberationist currents within a multiplicity of metaphysical and/or religious traditions? The cultivation of these currents and consciousness should be sown from the grass roots. Out of the soup kitchens and homeless shelters, and in the bowels of the informal settlements, wherever charity work is being carried out, we can find potential recruits to the cause, among both volunteers and beneficiaries alike. We should strive to get those we come across there to come together, to collaborate in the creation of a burgeoning network of social justice centres, the democratic-confederal equivalent of the "base communities." Our aim should be to construct this network along explicitly ecumenical lines, and at the same time to encourage those who participate in these centres to engage in study groups dedicated to the promotion of liberationist interpretations of the different faith traditions, alongside careful efforts to explain how these can reinforce, and be reinforced by, the paradigm of social ecology and the project of democratic confederalism.

Fortunately, these efforts do not have to start from scratch. The paradigm and project are already being prefigured in a variety of social movements, and there are many other existing organizations that are ripe to be infused with a social-ecological and democratic-confederal ethos. The work ahead has more to do with making connections among and between movements, than with starting a new movement per se. If it is imperative that we plant the seeds for the flourishing of a democratic confederal international of sorts, this confederation must take the form of a "movement of movements," as they say.

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In relation to the ecumenical agenda, the attempt to forge an understanding and alliance between different metaphysical traditions to converge in support of the paradigm of social ecology and the project of democratic confederalism, it is perhaps worth noting that the militant secularism characteristic of many factions of the anti-capitalist left has much more in common with the Abrahamic tradition than is frequently recognized or admitted. Take, for instance, the anarchists in Spain. In his magisterial account of the anarchist revolt in Casas Viejas, Jerome Mintz emphasizes that "[t]he anarchists cited the life of Christ and his teachings to point out the hypocrisies of the church." Indeed, what is more, he remarks, "[a]narchist writers and orators could express enthusiastic agreement with the ideals of early Christianity, but they saw these as having been quickly sacrificed." In their eyes, "Jesus was seen as one of the exploited - martyred by the priests, the army, and the government lackeys whose modern counterparts now paraded under his banner" (pp.66-67).

Likewise, among Marxists, Karl Kautsky once remarked, in reference to the early Christians, that "[r]arely has the class hatred of the modern proletariat attained such forms as that of the Christian proletariat" (in Fromm, p.35). So too would Rosa Luxemburg insist that "Christianity began as a message of

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consolation to the disinherited and the wretched. It brought a doctrine which combated social inequality and the antagonism between rich and poor; it taught the community of riches" (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1905/misc/socialism-churches.htm>). This revindication of the early Christians on the part of such eminent Marxist thinkers parallels the similar high regard for the purity and authenticity of the early years of the movement as expressed by not only the Spanish anarchists, but by liberation theologians as well.

More recently, Abdullah Öcalan has argued that "[t]he time of Jesus was a time of mystic brotherhoods; a conscious movement was seething, pressing for a new order of the oppressed against the universal order of Rome" (*Roots of Civilisation*, p.118). A movement he elsewhere describes "as the first ecumenical (universal) party of Rome's lumpenproletariat and poor" (*Sociology of Freedom*, p.63). Such a hermeneutic, by which the early Christians are interpreted in relation to their class composition, and accordingly ascribed revolutionary ambitions, certainly facilitates the potential for ecumenical convergence between secular revolutionaries and liberationist Christians.

"She that hath an ear, let her  
hear what the Spirit sayeth  
unto the Churches"

(Revelations 3:13).

## Dr. Thomas Jeffrey Miley

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Peace in Kurdistan is involved in a collaborative project in which, together, we are trying to envisage what self-determination can and must mean in the 21st century. We are interested in making connections between struggles for self-determination around the globe. We take our inspiration from Abdullah Öcalan's re-articulation of self-determination. Öcalan has emphasised that "the propagation of grass roots democracy is elementary." We encourage people to send relevant original articles for inclusion in this new series.

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