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**Religion and Class Struggle:
Transformations in Progressive Theology in the
United States and Some Implications for Race and Gender**

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Where We Are

While theological reflection has become more aware of matters of context in recent decades, the category of class has for the most part been neglected. This essay will argue that a deepened understanding of class will lead not only to a more adequate theology but also to a more adequate understanding of context, including the realities of race and gender.¹

¹ Thanks to my Ph.D. student Kevin Minister for a number of helpful suggestions and comments.

Progressive theology in recent decades has been spearheaded by various theologies of liberation, which emerged in relation to various liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s in many places around the globe. In the United States, for instance, Black theology, feminist theology and other forms of liberation theology emerged at the same time and independently of each other. Latin American liberation theology has its beginnings at the same time, also independent of the other approaches. When the various representatives of these liberation theologies began to encounter each other, there was little agreement about the interpretation of context, with feminists pushing for the importance of gender, African Americans for the importance of race, and Latin Americans for the issue of class broadly conceived.² What all of these approaches shared in common, however, is that they found the divine not at the top but at the bottom and in the tensions and conflicts of the world. This is what distinguishes liberation theologies both from conservative and liberal theologies, and the most promising developments still occur on these grounds, as we shall see.

There is another point of distinction between liberation theologies and liberal theologies, which is frequently overlooked. In the mid 1980s and early 1990s economists William K. Tabb and Michael Zweig edited volumes on liberation theology in the United States where this difference was elaborated more clearly than in the theological literature. In the words of Michael Zweig: “Liberation theology can be distinguished from liberal theology in that the former recognizes class conflict as a primary characteristic of society and positions itself consciously as an ally of one class against the other; whereas liberal theology, which also seeks to ameliorate

² See the proceedings of the first official meeting in Detroit in 1975, in Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, eds., *Theology in the Americas* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976).

the conditions of capitalism and sees the need for structural change, denies the class-conflictual nature of society and proposes instead a plan for social harmony among all classes.³ William K. Tabb notes the problems with liberal theology, claiming that “secular leftists” have a few questions for what he calls the “progressive churches”: “the antipathy to the concept of class struggle, the emphasis on reconciliation, the belief in the possibility of convincing the powerful to change their ways and become more sensitive to the needs of the poor disqualifies even the progressive church from serious consideration as a source of transformation.”⁴ While it does not come as a surprise that theologians frequently have a hard time dealing with conflict and confrontation, in this essay we will investigate how this attitude limits the transformatory potential of theology.

While substantial traces of the various liberation approaches remain, other categories have gained prominence in progressive circles. In the United States, we have now Hispanic theology, Womanist theology, Mujerista theology, Hispanic feminist theology, African American theology, Asian American theology, Postcolonial theology, etc. One of the contemporary mantras that cuts across most of these approaches and is repeated even by some who still identify with the concerns of liberation theology is a rejection of what they call “dualisms” and “binaries” — while at the same time affirming a postmodern taste for more fluid notions of otherness and difference.⁵ The targets of this critique are not just the old spirit/matter dualisms of neo-platonic

³ Michael Zweig, “Economics and Liberation Theology,” in *Religion and Economic Justice*, ed. Michael Zweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 38.

⁴ William K. Tabb, “Introduction,” in *Churches in Struggle: Liberation Theologies and Social Change in North America*, ed. William K. Tabb (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986), xvi-xvii.

⁵ See, e.g., Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Philip Berryman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997).

or idealist Christianity, which distort the deeper concerns of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Other oppositions are also classified as dualistic, and thus seen as passé. It is now seen as rather old-fashioned, for instance, to argue that there is a clearly identifiable opposition between oppressors and oppressed. Promoting a heightened sense for complexity it is argued that no one is ever completely in the position of the oppressed or the oppressor. The tools of the contemporary academy, including those of poststructuralism and of postcolonial theory have contributed to this assessment. Poststructuralist notions of power and postcolonial notions of hybridity and ambivalence have indeed broadened our horizons.⁶ Yet while there is merit to realizing the complexities of life, especially for religious people, what is in danger of being lost here is a clearer view of grave power differentials and their impact on us. Unfortunately, this loss occurs exactly at a time when power differentials are increasing and when people on the margins are getting more aggravated.

In this context, the triad of race, gender, and class is still upheld, but while major contributions have been made in the study of the complexities of race and gender, the discussion of class been neglected.⁷ If there are references to class at all, they usually refer to income levels, social stratification, or rather abstract notions of “poverty”; all concepts that are insufficient in order to understand the core problem. This is hardly different, of course, in many other fields of study in the academy as well, and the concentration on race and gender transcends the U. S.

⁶ Ambivalence, for instance, is one of the key concepts in my book *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

⁷ John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon, “What’s New about New Working-Class Studies?” in *New Working Class Studies*, ed. Russo and Linkon (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2005), 3-5, make a similar case about American Studies and studies along the lines of multiculturalism, which also focuses on race, gender, and class, increasingly including issues of sexuality.

academy. In 1994, for instance, newly elected South African President Nelson Mandela declared: “We are both humbled and elevated by the honor and privilege that you, the people of South Africa, have bestowed on us, as the first President of a united, democratic, non-racial and non-sexist South Africa, to lead our country out of the valley of darkness.”⁸ Freedom along the lines of race and gender are at heart of the new South Africa as Mandela defines it. Class is not even mentioned here, and the contemporary struggles of South Africa testify to the deeply problematic nature of this blindspot.⁹ What has been neglected, of course, is not just the notion of class. The notion of conflict and tension between classes—the sense that there is a class struggle being waged—has been neglected as well.

In this context, another academic trend has received some attention in progressive theological circles that might be helpful. Subaltern studies, as developed in India and Latin America, have helped some of us take a closer look at the “underside of history,” of which the classical liberation theologians used to talk. Subaltern studies have helpfully broadened the view of the underside in contexts where the focus might have been too narrowly restricted to matters of economics and the working class. In India and Latin America, subaltern studies have sought to incorporate other less visible aspects of oppression, including status (which is distinguished from class), caste, age, and gender.¹⁰ The problem with subaltern studies when imported into the

⁸ Inaugural Speech May 10, 1994. http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world_civ_reader/world_civ_reader_2/mandela.html.

⁹ For a perceptive internal South African critique, see *Bua Komanisi* 5:1 (May 2006), on the web at: http://www.sacp.org.za/pubs/buakomanis/2006/umsebenzi_may.pdf.

¹⁰ See the discussion in John Beverly, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 26.

United States is that here an awareness of class, which is presupposed in subaltern studies, has been missing at least since World War II.

It is my contention, therefore, that in the United States the concerns of subaltern studies will only make sense in light of another look at the issue of class.¹¹ Paying closer attention to class, we might learn some crucial lessons from subaltern studies for our own context. Antonio Gramsci, who coined the term, saw the subaltern classes as those classes who, unlike the working class of his time, were not unified and did not possess much of a class consciousness.¹² Marx would not have considered the subaltern to be a class, since the working class only becomes a class when it is organized in opposition to the ruling class: “In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interest, and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class.”¹³ As a result, there is no class without community and political

¹¹ I have argued consistently for the inclusion of the notion of class, see, for instance, my introduction to *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon, and Theology*, ed. Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); my introduction to *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, American Academy of Religion, 2003), and Joerg Rieger, “Liberating God-Talk: Postcolonialism and the Challenge of the Margins,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004). See in particular *ibid.*, 211-14.

¹² See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, trans. Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 52. His investigation focused on “the objective formation of the subaltern social groups,” “their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations,” “the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce,” the “new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework,” and “those formations which assert the integral autonomy [of those groups].”

¹³ Marx, *18th Brumaire* (sect. VII), reference in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 75-76.

organization.¹⁴ Keeping in mind Marx's analysis, Gramsci's broadening of horizons enables us, to take a closer look at those members of the subaltern groups who—due to their position of subservience and oppression—have a stake in the critique of the system but who are so fragmented that they are continually pulled back into the status quo.¹⁵

In the United States, this fragmentation of the subaltern is very common, and it has even affected those who once were proud of their working class identity.¹⁶ The study of class in the United States will therefore need to keep this phenomenon in mind, while at the same time investigating the tensions and conflicts that uphold the differentials between the classes even today.

Class as the key to another way forward

In contemporary theological discourse, informed by a range of poststructuralist, postcolonial, and other discourses, attention to dualisms and binaries is often considered unfashionable and outdated. Nevertheless, class discourse might help us pay attention to these topics once again. If ever there was a time to pay attention to dualisms it is now, when the gap between the rich and the poor keeps growing exponentially and when the war waged against

¹⁴ “Economic conditions ... transformed the mass of the people into workers. The domination of capital created the common situation and common interests of this class. Thus this mass is already a class in relation to capital, but not yet a class for itself. In the struggle, of which we have only indicated a few phases, this mass unites and forms itself into a class for itself.” (Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, ch. 2, sect. 5, reference in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 76.)

¹⁵ Rieger, “Liberating God-Talk,” 213.

¹⁶ Joe Bageant, *Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2007), reports that when he returned to the working class town where he grew up and joined the workforce three decades ago he was shocked about how much had changed.

those on the bottom rungs intensifies. Paradoxically, while this gap is often noted, there is little awareness of the war that is waged in order to maintain and expand it, and of the mechanisms by which it is being waged.

The fact is that dualisms and binaries are often produced in situations of severe differentials of power. Furthermore, these differentials of power are manifest most clearly in the relation between economic classes, and it is the relations between two key classes that frame everything else—between those who own the means of production and those who produce—that the differentials of power are not only defended but expanded.¹⁷ Corporations steadily increase not only their portfolios, but also their positions of power over against the workers. According to United States law, CEOs have no fiscal responsibility to their workers, only to their stockholders. In this context, restrictions placed on workers, such as restriction of unionizing activities, are only the tip of the iceberg. The workers are made to bear the full brunt of the global economy. Yet it is not only the corporations. The government plays a role in this struggle as well, by frequently shoring up the interests of business but less frequently supporting the concerns of the workers, even when they end up on the streets. Fewer than 40 percent of unemployed workers collected benefits ten years ago, compared to nearly 75 percent in the mid-1970s.¹⁸

The common complaint, especially in religious circles, that those of us who talk about these things risk instigating class struggle, overlooks the truth of the matter, which is that class

¹⁷ For a more detailed account of this matter see my book *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 23-40 and 48-53.

¹⁸ Reference in Michael D. Yates, “Economic Crisis, the Working Class, and Organized Labor,” in *What’s Class Got to Do with It?*, ed. Michael Zweig (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2004), 128. U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001*, 119th ed. (Washington, DC, 1999), table 537.

struggle has been waged for a long time by those on top—and that it is becoming more severe every day. The economic crash of 2008 and 2009 has added further steam to this struggle, as economic downturn has been used to slash jobs, wages, and benefits, even as companies began to pull out of the slump. Fifty percent of jobs lost during those years are projected not to come back.¹⁹ In this case, there is a fairly clear division between oppressors and oppressed, to use classical liberation theology language, which is the classical language of the Bible.²⁰

Class struggle waged from the top presents us with a dualism that is clearly problematic. The dualistic arrangement of top-down power is the foundation of empire, not only in terms of politics but also in terms of economics, and this dualism extends to cultural, intellectual, and religious relationships as well, as Edward Said's work on Orientalism has shown.²¹ Here, the world as a whole—not just politics and economics but also culture, art, intellectual life, emotional and psychological makeup—is refashioned in the image of those who are in control. As a result of these observations, it is often assumed that dualism itself is the problem. But there is a difference between what I call the dualism of the ruling class and a dualism of resistance. It does not necessarily make sense to reject dualisms of resistance together with the dualisms of the

¹⁹ Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, vii.

²⁰ See Norman Gottwald, "From Biblical Economics to Modern Economics," in *Churches in Struggle*, ed. Tabb, 144; Thomas D. Hanks, *God So Loved the Third World: The Bible, the Reformation, and Liberation Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983).

²¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); see also Walter Mignolo's term "Occidentalism," introduced in his book *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). My recent book *Christ and Empire* shows how such dualisms of power work in theology.

ruling class, for fear that the oppressed will turn into the oppressors and simply take over control of the same system.

The dualisms of the ruling class operate from the top down. These dualisms are built on clear differentiations between “us” and “them.” They imply clear goals and strategies, aimed at absolute control over others and at the total destruction of any alternative.²² In this context, any relation to the other that extends from the dominant side is geared at subduing the other to the dominant interests—even if it were only in the name of scientific investigation. What is called “area studies,” the study of other places and their habits, have often been misused for this purpose, and it is conceivable that even working class studies can be used to that end—to study the working class in order to control it better.

A dualism of resistance, on the other hand, looks different. It is never merely a simple reversal of the top-down dualism of the ruling class—as postcolonial and subaltern theorists should be able to understand. It draws on the existing asymmetries of power but it turns them around—a dialectical move in which it draws energy from them for different means and ends. When the oppressed develop unambiguous images of what they resist, pushing beyond vague notions of otherness and difference, they never do so with a sense that they are in charge or that they could quickly assume a position of control and top-down power. This is perhaps most clear in the situation of labor in the United States: it is simply unconceivable that the working class

²² Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher made famous the phrase: “There is no alternative” (to capitalism).

has the power to organize itself over night and to assume power to such a degree that it would then be able to slap around the bosses and the corporation.²³

A postcolonial theologian, R.S. Sugirtharajah, in his conclusion to the postcolonial commentary on the New Testament, critiques “stark choices between right and wrong, truth and falsehood” and continues that “this kind of stark choice is unhelpful to people whose lives are inherently untidy and their experiences marked by messy and mixed-up realities.”²⁴ I am not so sure, however, that a sense of what is wrong would be so unhelpful for people exposed to the harsh realities of top-down class struggle and other differentials of power. Is it not part of our problem in the United States that many oppressed people fail to identify the powers that keep them in bondage? Too many members of the working class share so little awareness of what the real problems are that they end up voting against their own interests. In Texas, for instance, forty percent of unionized workers vote for the Republican Party, which openly supports the interests of their employers over against the interests of workers. As a result of this lack of clarity, working people blame themselves or others—frequently immigrants or minorities—for the pressures they have to endure, rather than those who actually siphon off the surplus of their labor. Depression and even suicide is often the result, and misplaced passive-aggressive behavior not only against others but even against friends and family has become the rule. Michael D. Yates

²³ For an in-depth investigation of these dynamics see Néstor Miguez, Joerg Rieger, and Jung Mo Sung, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key*, Reclaiming Liberation Theology series (London: SCM Press, 2009), chapters 2 and 4. Even Marx’s much-maligned idea of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” might look different when seen in this light. The term does not have to mean *Gewaltherrschaft*, rule by force or top-down power. Bottom-up power is different.

²⁴ *Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, ed. Fernando Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah (London: T. & T. Clark Publishers, 2007), 459.

talks about the triad of exploitation, dependence, and insecurity, which accounts for the fact that people are now easily manipulated through shame.²⁵

In this situation, a dualism that picks up on the issue of class, in particular the pressures imposed on the working class, might be very helpful in resolving some key issues, including matters of race and gender, as will be argued in a moment. Nevertheless, a deeper understanding of class is required that goes beyond common references to poverty or social stratification. In Latin American liberation theology, the notion of the poor was the primary category, often defined in terms of whole nations by way of the insights of dependency theory. While these theologians often were not very precise about who the poor were (generally they had in mind both peasants and workers²⁶), when imported into the United States the term was further hollowed out, primarily referring to low-income people rather than workers who were considered lower middle class.²⁷

No wonder that liberation theologies in the United States hardly ever focused on issues of class. The results of such rather shallow definitions of class, which appeared to be unaware of the much clearer notions of class developed in the United States before World War II, have been

²⁵ Michael D. Yates, "The Injuries of Class," *Monthly Review* 59:8 (January 2008), 5.

²⁶ The Latin American Bishops Conference in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, made things worse in this regard, by talking about multiple preferential options for young people, indigenous people, peasants, laborers, unemployed/underemployed, urban dwellers, and old people. *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*, ed. John Eagleson and Philip Sharper (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 128-29.

²⁷ Still, not even these references to class made much of an impact in the United States, apart from some exceptions, like Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 281-82, note 48: "As a radical, I presume that the term 'class' means a group that shares objective conditions of social privilege or social exploitation. In conservative and liberal social theory 'class' means 'social strata.'"

disastrous. The biggest problem is that these understandings of class cover up the factors that produce classes in the first place. Thus the concern for the poor often petered out in efforts to “raise up” the lower classes—an obligation that is currently felt by both liberals and conservatives alike but that will contribute little towards dealing with the core of the problem.

This is not to say that the notion of the poor is completely useless, but it makes a tremendous difference how it is used. The widespread sense of the poor as people in need of support, perpetuated not only in religious communities but also in everyday politics that runs the gamut of the two-party system in the United States, is problematic because it fails to investigate why people are poor. If the question of poverty is seen in a different light, however, not as self-caused but as the result of exploitation and systemic pressures, things change. Here, class differentials can be understood in terms of relationships rather than as inherent identities. In one of his aphorisms, Bertolt Brecht puts it this way: “*Reicher Mann und armer Mann standen da und sah’n sich an. Und der Arme sagte bleich: ‘Wär ich nicht arm wärst du nicht reich.’*” (Rich man and poor man stood there, looking at each other. And the poor man said, pale in the face: “If I would not be poor, you would not be rich.”) In my book *Remember the Poor* (the title picks up a phrase from the apostle Paul), I talk about the poor in terms of the notion of the “real,” borrowed from Jacques Lacan. This real is different from reality; it is that which is constantly repressed by reality, pushed underground, that on whose back the successes and powers of reality are built.²⁸ Here is an interesting parallel to the work of Karl Marx, who talks about the

²⁸ See Joerg Rieger, *Remember the Poor: The Challenge to Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998), chapter 3. Lacan has a vague reference to Marx at this point, crediting him with the “invention of the symptom.”

proletariat as “the real itself.”²⁹ To be sure, this is not the stance of naïve positivism, since Marx understands the constructed nature of class. The working class is not natural but, he notes, “class itself is a product of the bourgeoisie.”³⁰ Now we have named the two key classes, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie—the workers and the ruling class, who owns the means of production. Under the conditions of capitalism these two camps set the framework for everything else. The middle class fits in between, yet (once again Marx) “rests with all their weight upon the working basis” and at the same time increases “the social security and power of the upper ten thousand.”³¹ The proletariat is the real because the other classes depend on its labor. In other words, the pressure that the workers endure is the (hidden) core of reality; the term pressure here can be developed both in terms of oppression and repression.

This insight helps us identify the limits of standard efforts to reintegrate the poor into the system, which are promoted both by the two big political parties in the United States and by many of the churches. Reintegrating the poor would be like treating the symptoms of a disease rather than its cause. When seen as the real, it becomes clear that the poor or the working class have an important role to play, for they have the potential (not always realized, of course) to tap into the deeper truth about how the system works, and they have access to some of the most effective tools to resist the system and to overcome it.³² Nevertheless, talking about “the poor”

²⁹ Letter to his father, 10 November 1837. Reference in Tom Bottomore, ed., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 74.

³⁰ Marx and Engels, *The Germany Ideology*, vol. I, sect. I C, reference in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 75.

³¹ Marx and Engels, *Capital III*, Theories of Surplus Value (ch. 17, sect. B 1d), reference in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 75.

³² See Rieger, *Remember the Poor*, 79-87.

may just be too problematic in our own context because it gives too much room to the standard efforts to deal with poverty.³³ Furthermore, if class is defined in terms of conventional understandings of the poor and the rich based on income levels, almost everyone in the United States ends up in the middle.

While a more adequate understanding of class begins, therefore, with the notion of relationship, as Michael Zweig has reminded us,³⁴ we need to develop greater clarity about which relationships are most fundamental in our situation. In a globalizing world, economic relations are prominent, but it is often overlooked that economic relations, even at the highest levels, are shored up by processes of production. While during times of rapid economic growth the stock market and finance capital can appear to be virtually detached from production, performance reports still matter, a fact that is most clearly visible in times of economic crises and downturn. In other words, the relation between those who produce and those who own the means of production is still at the core of the contemporary situation. Nevertheless, under the conditions of globalizing capitalism some of the terms might be defined more broadly, so that “ownership” here is not limited to property in the narrow sense but to control over means of production (a definition that is broad enough to include both CEOs and top investors). Workers, by the same token, might be defined more broadly as those who produce, not just material goods such as cars and computers, but also knowledge, services, entertainment, etc.

³³ Epigraph of *Remember the Poor*: “*The poor do not exist*,” which means that *the poor* do not exist in terms of the universal fantasy of the wealthy. The poor exist in repressed form on the underside of history, not in “reality” but in the “real.”

³⁴ Michael Zweig, “Economics and Liberation Theology,” 34: “Class is a relational category, including all people who share some important aspect of relationship with another class of people. Production is a central aspect of human society and a key (but not simple) determinant of class.”

As Zweig has pointed out, class identities are fundamentally rooted in the “power and authority people have at work.”³⁵ Due to the fact that a large percentage of people’s waking hours are spent at work and so much depends on work, people’s sense of self is to a large degree generated in work relationships, and some of the most existential questions of everyday life are negotiated at and through work. Work relations organize not only production but, at the most fundamental level, all other relationships between people as well. One of the key insights of the so-called New Working Class Studies is that work relationships impact all areas of life, including culture, religion, and even the emotional and personal.³⁶

If class is thus understood in terms of relationship and power, new political alignments (theologians talk about “solidarity,” but so do unionists) become possible. In this view, most Americans (62 percent are working class, 36 percent middle class, and only 2 percent belong to the capitalist class)³⁷ are linked with the lower classes around the world and not with the upper classes, as is commonly assumed to be the case.³⁸ This is crucial, and here lies one of the most important shortcomings of the debates around Latin American Liberation theology. We need to figure out whose interests are served in the broader picture.

³⁵ Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2000), 3.

³⁶ “Working-class culture does not exist only in the workplace, and ... class conflict is not limited to the ‘traditional’ working class. This leads to questions about how class works in both communal and individual experience, how people make sense of their class position, and how consciousness of class might lead to collective action.” John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon, “What’s New about New Working Class Studies?” 10.

³⁷ Zweig, “The Challenge of Working Class Studies,” in: *What’s Class Got to Do with It?* 4-7.

³⁸ See also Zweig, “The Challenge of Working Class Studies,” 3.

Lessons of class for gender and race

When I talk about class here I am not talking primarily about an idea: what matters is the embrace of class identity—which is a different sort of identity than what is usually promoted in identity politics. Since class identity shapes up in a struggle—the class struggle—it includes an awareness of the constructedness of this identity as well as an awareness of its limits.

Furthermore, the notion of class cannot be as easily romanticized as race and gender. When it comes to class issues, it makes no sense, for instance, to “celebrate diversity” or to invoke the infamous image of the “salad bowl,” a dish that apparently becomes tastier the more diverse and colorful ingredients are added.

In the Warren Beatty movie *Bulworth* (1998), there is a scene towards the end of the movie where lapsed Senator Jay Bulworth states that: “White people got more in common with colored people than they do with rich people.”³⁹ Bulworth’s sense that “rich people have always stayed on top by dividing white people from colored people” is demonstrated in great historical

³⁹ This scene takes place towards the end of the movie when Senator Jay Bulworth talks to a reporter on TV, dressed up in a hip hop outfit: “Rich people have always stayed on top by dividing white people from colored people. But white people got more in common with colored people than they do with rich people. We just got to eliminate them.” The interviewer, with an incredulous look on her face, repeats: “Eliminate.” The response: “Eliminate.” The interviewer, now aggravated: “Who, rich people?” “No,” the response comes, “white people. Black people too, brown people, yellow people. Get rid of them all. All we need is a voluntary, free-spirited, open ended program of procreative racial deconstruction.” Puzzled look of the interviewer. Bulworth: “Everybody just gotta keep fucking everybody ‘til they are all the same color.” An African American grandmother, watching TV on the couch: “Damn!” Bulworth: “I think its... uh, its ... it can take a while.”

detail by Theodore Allen.⁴⁰ The insight that racial differences are historical constructs matches with the basic sensitivities of the postmodern, poststructural, and postcolonial academy. The good news, of course, is that constructs can always be deconstructed. But the key question is what drives the construction and what keeps it in place, and this is where *Bulworth* and the postmodern academy—theology included—takes a wrong turn.

What constructs and keeps in place the difference in question, therefore, needs further scrutiny. Unfortunately, in theological circles and in many other approaches that fail to pay attention to class, moralism usually kicks in at this point. It is assumed that racism has to do with the moral habits of white people, who are just being selfish, who elbow their way through life, etc. The solution, then, is to become less selfish and more loving, kind, and respectful. But solutions that are too simplistic create more problems than they solve. Taking into account the categories of class and economics, and a more complex understanding of race, perhaps it would be more helpful to paraphrase Senator Bulworth in this way: Black workers and white workers have more in common with undocumented immigrant workers—a group that is much maligned these days—than with the rich.⁴¹

Since there is little awareness of class in most U.S. liberation theologies, when there is talk about poverty it is usually tied to issues of race and gender. While the concerns of racial minorities and of gender are clearly significant when it comes to matters of poverty, the problem

⁴⁰ Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (London: Verso, 1997). See also Andrew Levison, *The Working Class Majority* (New York: Penguin Books, 1974), 53: “the class differences between workers and employers are considerably greater than the differences between men and women or Blacks and whites within the working class.” Reference in Zweig, “Class and Poverty in the U.S. Economy,” in *Religion and Economic Justice*, 211.

⁴¹ Thanks to Kevin Minister for helping me phrase this sentence.

is that there is virtually no acknowledgement of the particular predicaments of lower class white people, whose lives are also affected by oppressive forces. This has disastrous consequences because by neglecting the struggles lower class whites, a great deal of sympathy is lost on both sides, and potential alliances never get off the ground.⁴² In these situations the status quo wins out, dividing and conquering as usual. Recall that, while African Americans and Hispanics are more likely to be poor (one third of African Americans are poor—but then again, two thirds are not), the majority of poor people in the United States are white, and many of them are women.⁴³ This loss of connection to working class white people in particular, who cannot expect much sympathy from many of the current U.S. liberation theologies and thus show little sympathy towards it, is absolutely devastating in religious circles. In this situation, working class whites who are religious have little chance but to side with the conservatives, as neither liberals nor liberationists in the United States show much awareness of their struggles.

In this context, a clearer understanding of class issues could do a great deal not only for matters having to do with oppression along the line of class, but also with oppression along the lines of race and gender. Awareness of class, for example, would help a great deal in creating solidarity between different racial groups. If working class white people were to realize that they have more in common with African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians than with white members

⁴² Zweig, “Class and Poverty,” 200, references a study of industrial workers in New Jersey, 75 percent of whom were not sympathetic towards the poor.

⁴³ Michael Zweig, “Class and Poverty,” 199, refers to a statistic of 1987 that shows that the great majority of poor people in the United States are white—about two thirds of all poor people. Two-thirds of all Black people are not poor (of course, the statistic also shows that nine-tenths of all white people are not poor either). Still, white men are a minority in the working class. See Zweig, *ibid.*, 213. These numbers have not changed in 1999. See Zweig, “The Mosaic of Class, Race, and Gender,” in *What’s Class Got to Do with It?*, 20.

of the ruling class, things would indeed be different. Of course, then they would also realize that they are not really white, in the sense of dominant whiteness, and that they are not middle class either. Awareness of class could also flag problems where solidarity with one's own racial group is concerned. Identity politics, still the typical approach to issues of race and, to a slightly lesser degree, to gender as well, is not helpful. The problem has not only to do with all the theoretical problems that identity politics creates,⁴⁴ but with the fact that identity politics is often based on identities created for the benefit of the status quo. Identity politics therefore creates false alliances within racial groups, which lead to further exploitation. The white worker who votes for the interests of big business because he considers himself to share an identity with the white bosses is just the tip of the iceberg.

Black women have realized this perhaps most clearly. bell hooks, for instance, despite failing to provide the deeper analysis of class that we are striving for, points out: "Women of all races and black people of both genders are fast filling up the ranks of the poor and disenfranchised. It is in our interest to face the issue of class, to become more conscious, to know better so that we can know how best to struggle for economic justice."⁴⁵ Angela Davis talks about the position of black women as a "provisional identity that allows the move beyond identity politics,"⁴⁶ leading to new coalitions between interests of race, class, and gender. While strategically we might begin with our provisional identities, we must not stop there. Davis

⁴⁴ See Rieger, "Theology and the Power of the Margins in a Postmodern World," in: *Opting for the Margins*, 181-85.

⁴⁵ bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 8.

⁴⁶ Angela Davis, "Reflections on Race, Class, and Gender in the USA," *The Angela Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 313.

recommends to “consider ‘women of color’ a point of departure rather than a level of organizing.”⁴⁷ She argues for the formation of coalitions that are “unpredictable or unlikely.” Those coalitions are grounded not in identity but in political projects, where people resist domination and oppression and tie together not only the usual groups that might be seen as resisting, such as prisoners, immigrant workers, and labor unions; these coalitions also link prisoners and students, students and immigrant workers, etc.⁴⁸ If these projects were to develop a clearer class base, much could be gained.

Feminist concerns would fit right in here as well since many women, too, have more in common with working class people than with rich people. Let us not forget that the majority of the poor are women. With feminism, there is a history that might be recovered here. As Dorothy Sue Cobble reminds us, strong currents in U.S. feminism were not only closely related to labor issues from the 1920s through the 1960s but also led by labor women.⁴⁹ This history is by and large neglected, and one can only wonder at this point what it would contribute if rediscovered.

Since class cannot be as easily romanticized as race and gender, class makes us rethink the ways in which we have tried to solve the other issues. Affirmative action may serve as one example. Obviously, Affirmative Action makes a lot of sense at some levels, and far be it for me

⁴⁷ Davis, “Reflections on Race, Class, and Gender,” 320. She cautions us of the “pitfalls of essentialism.”

⁴⁸ Davis, “Reflections on Race, Class, and Gender,” 324. The essays in a recent book on the question of class identity and postmodernity (*Re/presenting Class: Essays in Postmodern Marxism*, ed. J.K. Gibson-Graham, Stephen Resnick, and Richard Wolff [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001]) argue along similar lines: fluid and uncentered understandings of class identity counter an imagined capitalist totality and provide new and creative means of resistance. See, e.g., 16-21.

⁴⁹ Dorothy Sue Cobble, “When Feminism Had Class,” in: *What’s Class Got to Do with It?*, 25.

to dismiss it. But if Affirmative Action were applied to the class divide, it would mean the end of capitalism. It is one thing to say that we need more women and racial minorities in leading positions. In many ways, the system can only benefit from such diversity. Corporate America knows this. But it would defeat the purpose of the idea to say that we need more working class people in managerial positions. Here, the politics of identity receives a final blow: working class CEOs would no longer be working class, and one cannot but wonder what happens to women or racial minorities in managerial positions. Do they lose their racial or gendered identities?⁵⁰ This does not mean that solidarity is not possible, but it reminds us of the difficulties and hurdles that are usually overlooked when class is blended out. This question is especially important for those of us in the middle class who seek to be in solidarity with the working class.

The topic of democracy might provide one other example where the refusal to romanticize the notion of class helps us to rethink our categories. Without a doubt, quite a bit of progress has been made in this area. While voting rights were initially reserved for white males with property, voting rights have now been extended to people without property, women, and African Americans. Just recently it has become a realistic prospect for women and African Americans to run for president. But this understanding of democracy is limited to politics, with no consideration of economics, the realm where differentials of class are produced. What would happen if democratic principles were extended to economic processes? In terms of gender and race, the group of those who oversee matters of the economy is becoming more diverse all the time, despite glass ceilings and other limits. Nevertheless, if the working class were to acquire a

⁵⁰ In South Africa they talk about the “coconut,” in the United States it is the “Oreo.”

voice in economic decisions, a new thing altogether would be emerging with the result that the divisions of the classes itself would be deconstructed.

Another advantage of moving beyond identity politics is that it opens up new ways of addressing the dualisms and binaries of power. The tension is now not between identities fixed in nature but between positions that have been constructed in relationships of power and can thus be deconstructed as well. Just like workers are only workers in relation to the bosses, black people are black in relation to whites, the feminine is feminine in relation to the masculine, etc. A struggle against these sorts of dualisms is thus a real possibility, but one can only struggle if one understands who one is. In other words, the dualism between workers and bosses cannot be done away with by rejecting the idea of dualism; it takes embracing one's identity as worker and waging the fight from there. This perspective has the additional benefit of embracing what is sometimes rejected as mere liberal idealism, namely that the bosses too might have something to gain in the struggle, even if it were only their humanity. As Martin Luther King said towards the end of the 1960s in regard to the issue of race, we may have studied the effect of racism on its victims, but we have yet to study its effect on the racists. Just like racism distorts the humanity of the racist, capitalism distorts the humanity of the capitalist. If this is seen, there is an unexpected mutation of the struggle from special interest to common interest.⁵¹ In the long run, it might be possible to extend the union slogan that "an injury to one is an injury to all" beyond the working class—theology might thus recover a similar insight expressed by the apostle Paul long ago, that "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). Of course, these constructed dualisms of race, class, and gender are blended out by those on top, who hold firm to the myth of

⁵¹ See Rieger, "Developing a Common Interest Theology from the Bottom up," in: *Liberating the Future*.

individualism, as if women, ethnic and racial minorities, and workers were simply keeping themselves down and oppressing themselves. The truth is that the wealth of the ruling classes is produced on the back of workers. Capital is itself a social relation.⁵²

In this context, we can no longer do without addressing the reality of existing power differentials along the lines of class. And, due to the ways in which workers' identity is constructed (that their lives are indeed often "inherently untidy" and in touch with the messiness of reality), workers and other marginalized groups will not easily fall into the traps in which their bosses keep falling. For instance, I see little danger of totalitarianism or absolutism here, since working class people as well as other oppressed groups have little prospect of imposing their notions on the majority. This observation also applies to postmodern apprehensions about metanarratives. The metanarratives of oppressed people are quite different from the metanarratives of the controlling elites; aware that they are not in control, there are no illusions of universality, infallibility, and omnipotence, which are the marks of dominant metanarratives. To stay with the example of working people, class-consciousness might be a helpful sort of binary, especially if it unveils the existing binaries of power in a capitalist society, where the gap between those on the top and those on the bottom continues to increase. Such class-consciousness would not perpetuate the binaries of traditional identity politics and its essentialist ethos, which postcolonial theory rightly rejects; just the opposite: it would be aware of the fact that classes are not natural (or essential) but constructed by the powers that be, and that they can therefore be deconstructed again once people understand what is going on and organize alternatives. In other words, an awareness of the binary of oppression along the lines of class is

⁵² See Miguez, Rieger, and Sung, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire*, chapter 2.

necessary in order to resist it, with the potential of bringing clarity and resolve even to those who are in the middle and who do not really benefit from the status quo all that much either—in this case the “middle class.”⁵³ These comments are not meant to deny the importance of more subtle ways of resistance suggested by postcolonial critics and others, like “tactical ambiguity,” protective compliance, mimicry, and disguised resistance.⁵⁴ Yet while there is plenty of room for hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence, what first initiates resistance may well be a sense of a dualism in terms of class differentials.

Conclusion

“As with every important social institution, religion both helps to shape and is shaped by the larger society in which it operates,”⁵⁵ Michael Zweig writes. This is the basic point of my book *Christ and Empire*: while Christianity has been shaped by empire from its very beginnings, the empire has never been able to take over completely, and neither has capitalism. It is here that it pays to take another look at religion. Liberation theologies, despite their shortcomings, are examples where capitalism has not been able to take over Christianity completely, insofar as they continue to remind Christians that their place is on the fault lines of race, class, and gender, taking sides.

⁵³ On the peculiar tensions experienced by the middle class and the arising affinity to the working class see Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 35-39.

⁵⁴ The variety of options is nicely summarized by New Testament scholar Warren Carter and captured in Segovia’s introduction to *Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament*, 32.

⁵⁵ Michael Zweig, “Economics and Liberation Theology,” 8.

If the contemporary postcolonial and liberal Christian aversion to binaries and dualism is reconstructed in light of the class struggle, significant challenges to the middle class result. At a time when the power differentials are as severe as today, those who refuse to deal with the options for the poor and the margins made by the various liberation theologies tend to end up opting for the wealthy and those in control without realizing it. That the middle class cannot claim neutrality is perhaps the most crucial insight for mainline religious discourse in the United States today.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ The role of the middle deserves greater scrutiny. See, for instance, Zweig, *The Working Class Majority* and Rieger, *No Rising Tide*. Norman K. Gottwald, one of the few theologians who have dealt with the issue of class, also addresses this matter. See Gottwald, “Values and Economic Structures,” 64ff., in *Religion and Economic Justice*. See also Ulrich Duchrow et al, *Solidarisch Mensch werden: Psychische und soziale Destruktion im Neoliberalismus—Wege zu ihrer Überwindung* (Hamburg: VSA Verlag, Publik Forum, 2006).